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The University of Southern Mississippi

BLACKLETTER: FICTION AND A WALL OF PRECEDENT

by

Louis Anthony Di Leo

Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2015

## ABSTRACT

### BLACKLETTER: FICTION AND A WALL OF PRECEDENT

by Louis Anthony Di Leo

August 2014

The eight stories that make up *Blackletter* explore situations in which people are forced to challenge the legitimacy of authority, rethink and rebuild their own identities, or confront their own involvement in human and environmental degradation. A central theme running throughout the collection is law, broadly, and the ways in which people adhere to or sometimes break from a particular rule, be it social or legislative. In each case, the role of law and its correlation to place and identity—either overt or veiled—serves as a major component of each story. In this way I locate these stories within a sociolegal discourse that emphasizes the interpersonal impact of estrangement, abrogated civic and moral duty, and even candid hostility toward contemporary issues of responsibility and governance. Taken together with the closing nonfiction essay, this collection attempts to show that the laws we live by, as well as those we disobey or amend, comprise an evolving tradition, or wall of precedent. Like the traditions of prose and poetry, which have rules to be followed and sometimes challenged, this ongoing creation of precedent affects its direct participants while revealing that no person is entirely isolated from it, and therefore from the ability to engage it.

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2015

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Louis Anthony Di Leo

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
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## INTRODUCTION

Despite its repetition by professors and peers during my time in law school, blackletter law is surprisingly difficult to define. The legal system's expansion and the term's overuse has conferred it with a *je ne se quoi* quality, allowing speakers to feel they understand it and yet frustrating their attempts to verbalize a precise and encompassing definition. Depending on context, blackletter law may denote "[o]ne or more legal principles that are old, fundamental, and well settled" ("Blackletter law"); it could refer to a specific piece of legislation, such as a statutory definition; "or it could be a Rule, determining what an expert may testify about" (Cling 32n15). More relevant to my use of the term as the title of this collection, however, is its definition as one of "the two kinds of law that govern what the court must do [in any particular case]"—the other type being case law, or "[judicial] opinions that interpret blackletter law and serve as precedent for the current courts" (32n15). Judicial opinions, or case law, may expand blackletter law, change it, or replace it with precedent to be followed in future cases wherever "the facts are alike, or, if the facts are different, [where] the principle that governed the first case [the blackletter law] is applicable to the different facts" (Entchev 273). There is, then, an overlap in meanings among blackletter law, case law, and precedent.

Despite possessing an "old, fundamental, and well settled" insinuation, blackletter law evolves with new scenarios, demonstrating the play of signification that poststructuralists claim for all language. To picture this evolution, one might think of a soaring brick wall layered with cases that build upon previous cases. Some of its sections topple into darkness, taking down doctrines like "separate but equal"; others are



restructured or restored, as was the case with capital sentencing in the early 1970s. All the while new bricks continue moving the wall skyward.

In the context of fiction writing, my use of the term is not altogether different from the rotation of meanings it is burdened by in legal discourse. The “blackletter” is the *before*, i.e., the old and well-settled, that which the writer has read and studied, and the *after*—the product of the writer’s latest efforts, which may adhere to, refute, expound upon, or alter antecedent principles. It is precedent and it is derivative work, doctrines and their toppling, restructuring, or return in time and case. In this way, the blackletter as a description is apt to the creative process as well as to growth of the “one great Poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world” (Shelley 8); that is to say, to the individual’s art and to tradition. However, what T.S. Eliot saw as “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer” (28) has, like law, grown into a global system that, while appearing settled, continues to be constructed and reconstructed through both canon revision and accessibility.

It may seem that in the creative context this evolution must have an endpoint; once the blackletter law is written, its words are no longer available to some future writer. Or, as Eliot put it, “Not only every great poet, but every genuine, though lesser poet fulfils once for all some possibility of the language, and so leaves one possibility less for his successors” (118). Thus, the growth of tradition may be perceived as necessarily limited and limiting, situating the writer atop a massive wall of authors who inspire him but also restrict him with their collective height. This dichotomy of pressure upon the writer forms the central thesis of Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, where he argues, “The largest truth of literary influence is that it is irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare

will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him” (xviii). In law, too, judges and legislators see a wall of precedent, a composite of blackletter bricks without which they would have nothing to model their own hypotheses on, and because of which they are inescapably constrained. But in practice, blackletter law expands, collapses, and expands again, making it less like fixed and settled composite of principles and more like a wall under constant construction, springing from and forming a legal tradition for which the notion of completeness is impractical.

So why, in respect to the art of fiction, would anxiety about exhaustiveness grow with the writer’s understanding of craft and tradition? Perhaps it’s because of an egotistic dread that another writer has done it better. Perhaps it’s because the imperative to “develop or procure consciousness of the past and . . . to develop this consciousness throughout his career” (Eliot 28) alters the writer’s relationship with his own work, forcing him to incessantly resituate it under a more detailed and critical lens that renders it less interesting or emphasizes its imperfections. Or, perhaps it is simply because his “close critical analysis of literary works . . . has had the accidental side effect of leading [him] to the notion that the chief virtue of good poetry and fiction is instructional” (Gardner 41).

Viewing tradition as a fixed wall, writers and scholars, judges and legislators, can all suffer an irresistible anxiety; the vast height of precedent can make it seem as though everything of value has already been cemented in place. Yet, while themes, styles, objectives, and scenarios repeat, subtle changes exist in the writer’s literary encounters and experiences, so that pursuing his art is not to mold an entirely new brick while at the

top staring down, but to scrape inspiration from sections, allow its dust to settle alongside experience in his subconscious, and to build with a mind toward the infinite space above.

Scraping seems an appropriate analogy for the role of influences, since they're acquired piecemeal and only fleetingly identifiable. Influences develop, disappear, are rediscovered, and rise again to new effects throughout the creative process like the protracted growth of the whole tradition. Generally, though, when the writer is asked to identify his influences, he is tasked with answering another question: "Who do you write like?" This question is tied to the notion that the writer seldom achieves "effects much larger than the effects achieved in books he has read and admired" (Gardner 11). Yet, to try to list the artists who have influenced his own work would be difficult even without venturing into those life events, people, places, and other arts that have affected him in one way or another. Indeed, influence in general is far vaster than the handpicked group of artists the writer attributes it to, as it seems to be only occasionally a conscious power. And the list for the writer of literary prose or poetry almost always ignores nonliterary authors.

The literary writer resists acknowledging authors like Ray Bradbury or Alan Moore, or Roald Dahl, because their craft is labeled different from his own—in obvious ways perhaps from poetry and nonfiction, and still in fundamental ways from literary fiction. And yet, imagining a literature where the writer's only influences are other writers who do what he does creates a drab vision of art. There are differences, for sure: form and aim, among them. But influence comes from everywhere around the writer.

In my case, influence has come from the children's books my mom read to me throughout my early childhood, and those works I continued to read into

preadolescence—books like *Encyclopedia Brown* and *Old Yeller*. Then there are the school-assigned readings, books by Harper Lee, Alice Walker, Chinua Achebe, John Steinbeck, J.D. Salinger, and Mark Twain. Still, there are more: the works I read in and outside of my college courses, the great deal of Longfellow I read while working at his childhood home in Portland, Maine. But alongside all of these are the nonliterary texts, as well. Essays on history, anthropology and philosophy, biographies of artists and politicians, and the judicial opinions and statutes I read in law school.

Behind this expansive understanding of influence lies a question of practicality: How can the writer understand and recognize his influences properly when everything he reads permeates him with an only sometimes-ostensible effect? This leads me to believe that there is only one way to take up the task. If the writer understands *influence* to denote not influence per se but conscious *ambition*, that is, which writers he most admires and emulates, the question transforms into one that is succinct and answerable: “Who are your favorites and why?” Reducing the question of influence to one of personal preference establishes those authors and poets the writer holds closest to his work; and while it may not recognize every layer of the blackletter wall he studies and scrapes at, it provides hints of precedent from which to see his work as evolving.

This new question doesn’t require a laundry-list answer; in fact, it seeks to avoid just that. But a single author may be too little to offer a glimpse at the precedent the writer is moved by. Two, on the other hand, may provide enough evidence for an understanding of the sections of wall the writer claims. For this reason I reduce my own influences to two: Shakespeare and Gabriel García Márquez.

Now the writer can explore the more important inquiry of *why*. It introduces an opportunity for a sort of self-inquiry: What events or moments in the writer's life led to his appreciation for this author? With this, the search for understanding influence becomes a self-reflection, and the writer may appreciate his work through a more holistic rendering of it. In my case, Shakespeare is woven into every heartstring and nerve in my brain that ever said, "Write!" It's no coincidence that my first attempts at short stories occurred when my fifth-grade English teacher, a woman named Christine Shanley, required my participation in an annual Shakespeare play. I had drawn comic books of my childhood dog as a superhero before, but it was around the time I was cast as Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that my creative interests turned toward words. My teacher's affection for Shakespeare had a lasting influence, and twenty years later I still remember the wild expression on her face as she demonstrated the tone she sought for the line, "Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in" (II.ii.256).

As I made my way through school, my interests in Shakespeare and writing continued to grow. In college seminars I developed a fascination with the green world, that fantastic place of transformation, discovery, and magic outside of the cities. In turn it led to my valuing of place and its many possibilities in stories, an interest that became a driving force for my master's thesis and intensified during my time at the Center for Writers. Place has a major role in the stories included in this collection, as well, helping to establish characters' disconnection and loss, displacement, or roles in environmental harm. But Shakespeare's influence on me is far greater than the recognition of the value of place in crafting a story; his language taught me what it means to feel, or more precisely, to empathize.

Growing up as the son of a trial attorney, I was fortunate to be able to accompany my dad to court and to his office in the summers and during school holidays. His practice in family law provided me a perspective on the effects of abuse and neglect on children that would have been otherwise remote from my life. All the while, Shakespeare's words guided me with a sense of obligation to act: "O! I have suffered / With those that I saw suffer" (*The Tempest* I.ii.5–6). When I began law school in 2009, it was with the recognition that the nation's juvenile courts are the most in need of dedicated attorneys, that those courts' expanding needs require a new generation of committed lawyers to provide representation to youths. My goal was to help remedy the deficit in representation by attorneys and to dedicate myself to improving that system. I continued writing, but I didn't expect to find the personal awakening I did in environmental law, which returned me to works by Emerson and Thoreau, and through them to the study of literature. As part of the blackletter to my work, Shakespeare's effect on the development of my craft has been upon its motivation and objectives, what would be called its spirit in a legal context, as it provided my writing with "[t]he general meaning or purpose . . . as opposed to the literal content" ("Spirit of the law"). In my stories, I aim to encourage empathy and understanding through accessible characters that evade clichés and stereotypes, and through drawing attention to issues of duty and social justice.

While Shakespeare taught me how to feel and lessons about the spirit of writing, Gabriel García Márquez taught me the language of feeling and what might be called its letter—"the literal meaning . . . rather than the intention or policy behind it" ("Letter of the law"). Since 2007, when I began applying to M.F.A. programs and decided to make

my development as a writer a serious pursuit, García Márquez has had a greater effect on my work than any other.

My introduction to his work began with a suggestion from a college mentor, a poet named Carol Frost. The suggestion included just a few titles from García Márquez's *Collected Stories*. I was immediately taken with his flawless use of omniscient insights and employment of descriptive narration rather than dialogue. His scenes unfolded into pictures and his words, confidently carrying emotions with each arrangement, painted them. In retrospect, it's no wonder that his descriptions and settings were what initially attracted me to his writing; nor is it a surprise that I grew fond of Shakespeare's green world. For I had the good fortune of spending two or three weeks each year on the island of Grand Cayman from the time I was three or four through high school. With each visit over those first few years, my family and I developed friends and acquaintances within the Cayman community. It became and still is for me a place of magic, where I spent days wandering down roads under the sun, and evenings dancing to electric keyboards and drum machines. It was very much a green world, a place of inner and outer exploration that "has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world we create out of our own desires" (Frye 182), one that charges the play "with the symbolism of the victory of summer over winter" (183–84).

Beyond just the attraction of described landscape, there is another element that draws me to his writing: his imagery and the sort of magic it expresses. It's not the magic of magical realism, though—a term García Márquez loathed. That is to say, it wasn't the old man with wings or the woman's ascension into Heaven while she is out hanging

laundry to dry that drew me in. Instead, it was the effect the writing had on me, one that I typically experience only when reading lyric poetry.

Having used much of my time as an undergraduate trying to emulate the intensity and brevity of authors like Raymond Carver, Bernard MacLaverty, and Denis Johnson, I was lured to the simple and sweet lines in García Márquez's writing, like one from "I Only Came to Use the Phone": "Wearing a student's coat and beach shoes in April, she looked like a bedraggled little bird" (*Strange Pilgrims* 72). The sentences are enchanting and, at times, the stories seem almost fable-like. That, I decided, was the magic I wanted to seek. I wasn't fluent in the techniques of García Márquez, though, so I began with crude imitations of lines and descriptions. Slowly, as the attempts continued, they grew to be something else, something that felt more like mine. And perhaps such attempts can only grow through the reading of other writers; for if I had been limited to García Márquez alone, I would have developed only imitation.

Imitation is not without its use, of course; in law, it can be a part of developing new blackletter. When a case demands it, judges search for extensions of doctrines that transition naturally or exceptions that fit the logic of previously made exceptions. Yet, once extensions or exceptions are put into application, they constitute new blackletter rules. In fiction, too, imitation can help the writer in his logic, providing a technical awareness of rules and the ways in which authors have responded to them in the past. But it's only in the individual's application of those techniques within his own stories that any new blackletter may come into existence.

In each of the stories that make up this collection, I try to do something topically and stylistically different. Yet, each one explores my broad interest in law. By *law* I not



only mean statutes or encounters with police, but also the rules we create and establish for ourselves and the ones created by the communities in which we live.

“Styrofoam Cups” takes up a question of personal and social duty: What do people owe to themselves, to those they’re closest to, and to the world? In it I highlight the crime of negligence, which involves a breach of duty that causes damages, and I link the characters’ distance from moral duties at work with their distance from the same outside the office. Thus, Maggie’s rejection of a duty to herself to pursue love in favor of security moves alongside her firm’s endless defense of their pharmaceutical client. Through dialogue and the continued use of the office cups, the story also seeks to connect these ideas with inevitable devastation that is often known but ignored. As such, it insinuates that the rejection of certain duties, including those owed to the self, is in fact a social and moral wrong.

The second story, “God’s Arm,” is unique to the collection for a number of reasons, not least of which is its brutality, an aspect I discovered accidentally but that, once recognized, had to be realized despite my discomfort. It began as an attempt to imitate the impression Leo Tolstoy creates in his story, “God Sees the Truth, But Waits.” I wanted to craft a story that seemingly speaks for a misunderstood and unclear deity, charging the story with personal and contemporary interpretations of wrongs and punishment. However, I deliberately sought an escape from Tolstoy’s realism. The supernatural setting aims to move the focus beyond the protagonist, Baba, and his role in the depraved crimes portrayed. Its purpose is to help imbue the story with two philosophical questions: First, is there righteousness in punishing others whose actions violate sacred dogmas? Second, what is just punishment? The retributivist ideal of the

punishment fitting the crime was something I wanted to incorporate, and without the protagonist's ability to relive each murder as his own, such punishment does not always tally the sum of multiple violent crimes. Baba waking up again each day in darkness not only speaks to retributivism, but also serves two other elements of punishment philosophy: deterrence and rehabilitation. Here, the deterrence isn't of other members of society, though, but of the protagonist himself, and through empathy it directly connects with rehabilitation.

"Porter's Canvas" is the only story here to have its beginnings trace back to a writing exercise. It was only a short paragraph at the time, but what I had written was enough to demand my attention. In expanding the story, I decided to use the painting competition as a way to explore the perception of law as a labyrinth of bureaucracy. What I ended up doing was exploring the frustration of art's competitiveness amidst creative rivals and in the publishing world. Despite this evolution, it's the next story in the collection that has undergone the greatest revision.

During my second year at the Center for Writers, I looked back several of the pieces I had written in college, including several poems. One poem in particular stood out for its language. It had a few peculiar allusions and some heavy-handed similes, but phrases within the half-page poem forced my attention. Over the course of two months, the poem expanded then collapsed into something new. As it began to expand again it suddenly resembled something closer to fiction than poetry, and it became "An Ocean Holds My Story." I didn't want to part with the language or the rhythm of the poem, though. So I transitioned it into a flash fiction piece, bringing much of the original language. Some of it has lasted and some of it hasn't; but what has stayed has become as

important to the story as the continued present of its narration. It's also the strongest example of the collection's emphasis on law being extended beyond the limits of mere legal action. The law in focus here is that of love, especially love lost and its effects upon present love and possibilities for the future. This story is also one of the more layered of those here, though, so to say it's only about love would be to miss much that is going on—and so much of what I enjoyed writing.

For all the apparent supernatural elements of “God’s Arm,” “Floundering Awe” is the most fantastic story of this collection. While my interest in experimenting with magical realism stems from my admiration for the language of García Márquez, I was also interested in juxtaposing fabulous elements with a realist tone. This story represents my first attempt at doing so. In terms of its incorporation of law, I chose a route similar to “An Ocean Holds My Story,” though not quite as stretched. I meant for the focus here to be both the environmental stress caused by the densely populated New York metropolitan area and the waning authority of the past. The increasing ease with which a person may observe ecosystem destruction demands that nostalgia for the past fade and be replaced by new authorities that ignore the old rules and traditions that led to the contemporary devastation. In this story, Rel’s daughter symbolizes the opportunity for that and the story encourages critical reflection on the bases for authority.

Writing can serve as a powerful vehicle for sociopolitical and cultural critiques. The idea that “[a]ll literature is a political act” (Dobyns 183) underscores both my creative process and my stories themselves. That isn’t to say my work is a product of political motivation, though. Art is not propagandistic, but I don’t shy away from creating characters that have definite worldviews or stories enmeshed in political issues. As an

example of this understanding through a different genre, my nonfiction essay, “A Wall of Precedent,” seemed to be a natural fit for this collection.

Perhaps because of my training in law and my enjoyment in discussing contemporary issues, I find myself increasingly interested in nonfiction. And while I can’t imagine it as my primary genre, since fiction is where I find the most satisfaction, writing directly about law in “A Wall of Precedent” offered me an ability to explore the development of my feelings toward civic duty and my slow retreat from religious affiliation in the years following 9/11. In that way, nonfiction has offered me a therapeutic value similar to fiction. But where nonfiction often indulges directness and consciousness, especially in nonliterary forms, fiction puts the subconscious to work. It offers the writer a path toward “the totality of experience reckoned with, filed, and forgotten, [where] each man is truly different from all others in the world” (Bradbury 36). In that “fantastic storehouse . . . [a]ll that is most original lies waiting for [the writer] to summon it forth” (38). For this reason, fiction remains the art I value most.

In fiction the academic multitasking I’ve done for the past seven years ends and my studies work cooperatively in a creative endeavor. Preparing for the LSAT at the start of my M.F.A. program, writing my master’s thesis during my second semester of law school, and taking the bar after my first year at the Center for Writers only worked through constant compartmentalizing; in fiction it tapers off. Discovering ways that my interests combine to raise critical questions and create compelling stories becomes my task. As this collection attempts to show, the ongoing (re)construction of the blackletter—in writing and in law—affects its participants, but no person is entirely isolated from it, and therefore from the ability to engage it. There’s much space above.

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## FICTION

## STYROFOAM CUPS

The bay bridge was backed up at five o'clock. Maggie tapped her index fingers against the steering wheel, beating the rubber to some tune on the radio. The snapping trail of ocean air shifted through her windows with the breeze as she pressed the sunroof button and pointed her face up, eyes closing, a long overdue spring falling in over her leather seats.

There were only fifty yards or so until the bridge met the other side, but for the first time in maybe months Maggie didn't care how long it took to get home. The day was an easy one, not too much to get done as she finished the last of her work on the recent Burmen Pharmaceuticals assignment—another class action. The partners even let everyone at the office out early. Right then she was content to sit, docked in unbroken sunlight and waiting for the next five- or six-foot advance. She looked back down at the car ahead of her, Will's Dartmouth-green sedan with the "Live Free Or Die" plates still on it, and she remembered Monday:

"I'm done. I've had it," Maggie had told him, pouring a cup of coffee. She and Will took their breaks at the same time every day, having a cup of coffee, sometimes going to the first floor's cafeteria for a sandwich and soup or chowder-Thursdays. "I can't work on these assignments anymore." With another sip she sat down in the stacking chair across from him at the break-room table. "Every time I get handed one, I tell myself this is it, this is the last one I'm doing. And then I do nothing, I just wait for the next one to come."

Will shifted in his seat, uncrossing and re-crossing his legs, continuing to scratch blue coconut trees with his pen on his empty Styrofoam cup—other times it was a seaside

or a flower, barracudas or a leatherback turtle. They were fairly extraordinary little sketches, Maggie thought, with complex details deserving a better canvas than a throwaway cup. *Maybe, she wrote at night, that's why he does it. The irony. But if so, it's a bit negligent.*

*Genius weird, not kidnapper weird* was how she described him to herself. *You know, just quirky, a little awkward. But it's kind of charming.* It was shortly after he started at the office that she had trusted the appeal to writing, detailing it all in the composition book-turned-journal she kept beneath her bed—a place for thoughts that were more intimate than status updates, that weren't meant for friends' plus-ones or quips. *And his chest, his face, even his hair is just damn hot. He doesn't look like a lawyer, like he stepped through a lawyer carwash in the morning and into his suit, like his wife combed his hair.* She knew she shouldn't be interested, nearly six years his senior: *I'm more like his older sister and you can't go anywhere with that,* she had written months back.

In the break room on Monday she had smiled saying, “I want to pack up and move to your drawings.”

Will didn't even look up. “Do it,” he breathed with indifference. “I'm on this beach right now, waiting for someone to go snorkeling with.”

“Yeah. Well, if it weren't for real life, I would.”

“Yeah.” His voice grew small, subdued. “If it weren't for real life, me too.”

Maggie smiled pitifully. Will had told his mother that he'd be a lawyer about a year before she and his father died in a car accident outside Portsmouth. There was no drunk, no teenager, just iced-over roads and shitty luck. He hadn't ever talked about his



inheritance, but Maggie assumed it was sizable since his father had worked as a contractor for the Air Force.

*He probably could afford to do it, she wrote, to just leave everything. He could leave the cold and go live under palm trees and lay on the beach... at least until the inheritance runs out. By that point though he could have a dozen good friends in that place, any one of them might be able to help him out and steer him towards a job.*

“But Will,” she started then sighed, measuring the sympathy in her tone. “I’m sure your parents would’ve wanted you to be happy.” She had said it before, at the end of January, in the same conversation she told him their intimacy had no future.

Will sketched on, not even glancing at her. She felt his awkwardness thickening the air around her, and she broke into a sweat. This wasn’t unusual when she was talking to him. He had, as she once remarked in her journal, *a weird effect*. And she had grown a bit fond of the mild discomfort she had to fight through to talk to him.

“Barbuda?” she asked. He looked up. “Barbuda again?”

“Always. They’re all Barbuda, Maggie.” His eyes stared—two large, abandoned bowls of dark syrup—and then moved beyond her into some thought. They stayed there for a moment, looking at nothing in particular, before he went back to pressing pen to cup. “Antigua and Barbuda.”

“I know, Will.”

On a weekend in early January, days after they had begun their quiet relationship, Will described for her the trips to the island he took when he was a kid while lying next to her in her bed, telling of the magic that glowed in the ocean at day and spilled out onto beaches and into sky at night, magic that didn’t necessitate a lover to appropriate it or one

to appreciate it, just one's own eyes and skin. *I want to see it, I want to know it so badly*, she had written later that night after he had fallen asleep. *I think I love him*. But she couldn't sleep with these last words sitting in her mind and journal, feeling them like spider bites. She finally snuck out of bed, making sure she didn't wake him, and itched their meaning away into a thick, inky highway.

In the break room that Monday, still scratching into Styrofoam, Will said, "Actually, it's north of Antigua, west of Saint Kitts. Top of the Lesser Antilles."

Maggie thought over what she might confess to her journal later that afternoon or at night: *Am I responsible for his apathy? I feel like maybe I've alienated him. He's been so sad since I told him we had to stop seeing each other. But I had to. We still hang out every day. I'm not sure if it's all because of me or what. His parents? That couldn't be it anymore. Plus, he was so happy for a while. But I think he's lonely. No siblings, no pets, no friends or family as far as I know. The only child of two only children. He's been in town long enough. But I don't see him outside work anymore. Maybe I should invite him out. Maybe I should help him find a puppy, something.*

"You know," Will said, nudging the pen back and forth over a small spot at the bottom of the cup, "after childhood, after college, the average American life is something like fifty-five years, like four hundred eighty-thousand hours, and each year we lose more than three thousand being clocked in our cubicles, in boxes—like these cups," he nodded toward the corner of the room where the cardboard boxes of dispensable cups sat. "Just waiting. That's eighteen years of our lives, of that fifty-five." He stopped scratching and looked at her. "Over thirty percent of our adult life we'll spend as unused Styrofoam

cups. And then,” he looked back down, “one day, used and done.” He gave a tight-lipped smile. “Negligent, isn’t it?”

“Did you memorize all that?” She dabbed the little sweat at her hairline with a finger. “Those numbers?”

He shook his head. “Google, earlier. I was sitting here before you got here, thinking about it, that’s all.”

“I don’t think we’re like Styrofoam cups, Will.” Maggie leaned back in her chair. “Even if we’re in,” she lifted her hands, giving the rabbit-eared index and middle fingers a gestured pull: “a ‘box,’ cups are just cups. Even yours, with all their fancy tropicalness. And if you constantly feel disposable, you’ll end up being disposed of. Ha!” She grinned, satisfied at taking the metaphor a step farther.

Will went back to drawing. “I think it’s negligence. A breech of duty and care.”

“To who?” Maggie shot back, but Will kept drawing.

“The country. The world. Posterity. No.” He paused his pen midair, staring hard at a single spot. “Actually it’s negligence per se.”

This one Maggie knew inside out, and she smiled. “What statute?” She leaned back again. “I may be a paralegal, but I’m a damn good paralegal.”

Will glanced up and caught her eyes for a second before he his mind moved back to the inscribed palm leaf. “You are. Prettiest, for sure.”

Maggie blushed as another silence swooped in and another bead of sweat formed at her hairline. “Aw shucks.” She dabbed again at her forehead. “So what statute?”

Will’s eyes narrowed as he thought, and his pen slowed down into wavy contours. “The law,” he paused. “The law of intergenerational justice.”

“That’s not a thing,” Maggie snapped, folding her hands on the table with a smirk.

“Sounds nice, though.”

Will sketched another moment, adding a sturdy minor line of blue to a palm. Then he stopped completely, put the cup on the table, and twisted it toward her.

Beautiful as always, she thought: The place I want to be. But she didn’t have a moment to speak before he went on.

“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution.”

Maggie’s hands jumped off the table and over her head. “That’s not a statute.”

“No, it’s better. Preamble is constitutional.”

“In what court?”

Will lifted his pen and pointed up: “The Supremes. It should be a limitation. Which you should be embracing absolutely, Miss Avocado.” This was a double-dig. Maggie was the outspoken libertarian of the office—gay marriage: good; legalizing pot: sure, fine; but federal taxes, the commerce clause, and Obamacare: living-document bullshit. Avocado came from the guacamole-ingredient’s less common name, alligator fruit—“Reptilian shell and a yellow belly,” Will explained the first time he called her it, after she ended the relationship. He apologized but not before Maggie scribbled a half-page of *Fuck him*’s in her journal. After that she began to think the page proved her affection, though, because he had said it with such sadness. So she tore it out, only to then hate her self-editing and glue-stick it back in onto the next page.

“Sorry,” he added looking at her with his syrupy eyes. He looked down. “That was a bit much. I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry.”

She had a deep sigh to let it away. “It’s okay. I get it. I understand.” *I think I*, Maggie remembered writing. She leaned forward over the table, wrapping both hands around the cup sewn with blue lines, studying the grooves scorched with ink and ignoring the large palmettos. “Do you like dogs?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about dying.” Will stared at the empty side of his cup. “Or faking it. Leaping off a building,” he said, his arms leaping out suddenly like a skydiver’s, and he smiled. “Or pills or something, and then going. Just disappearing. No more cell phone or Internet, or Comcast, or caring about what’s on TV Tuesday nights. No more cubicles or clocked hours. I’ve been thinking about what it must be like being dead to the world, the Internet. Digital death, I guess.” The small roll of laughter he let out with that was cut short: “I guess I’d have to be dead, though, to really escape.” He finally looked at her and noticed her mouth hanging open, staring. “Yes,” he said then stood. He lifted the Styrofoam cup from her hands and took it to the water cooler. “I like dogs.”

Maggie maintained the silence for another moment, wondering what she was supposed to say to that, and finally let out an anxious laugh. “The Internet? Why would you have to die or fake your death? Just go. Or just delete your accounts. Or delete your accounts and then go. Take whatever money you have. Why not do that?”

Will rubbed his eye with a whole hand as if some bit of dust had fallen in. “Because then you’re not a thing.” He sat again. “Your friends or family, people, everyone says something was wrong with him. That guy had problems, because that’s

where the world is.” He took a small sip and stared into the water. “Last weekend my ex-girlfriend got married in Northampton.”

Maggie tried to think if he had ever told her about this girlfriend. “I didn’t know you had an ex.” She paused, wondering if she too now counted as an ex. “Were you two serious?”

Will gave a glum smile. “It doesn’t matter now one way or the other. She’s just an ex, and exes are exes. I think I’m an O.”

“You’re a strange boy is what you are,” Maggie said with a teasing unconcern and a shrug. But his eyes didn’t leave the water in the cup. “You know what?” She leaned closer, over her coffee so no attorney passing by could hear. “Let me know when you do it,” she whispered. “Give me a sign. I’ll meet you there.” She pointed to the Styrofoam cup. “In Barbuda.”

\*

How funny, she thought now, and she turned up the car stereo. She and Will had hit it off as soon as he started at the firm the summer before, fresh out of New England Law. They flirted over autumn, at pubs after work on Fridays, and on New Year’s they slept together after heading back to her apartment from a party at Bull Feeney’s—to listen to her records, they had said at the time. She couldn’t let it continue, though. The partners had a hardline rule against intra-office dating—a secretary and a paralegal were fired the year before, after a Christmas party led to a not-so-hidden affair. Still, Maggie let it go on for six weeks, even thinking of telling him each day at work that she couldn’t take the risk anymore. But every day at 3:30, two hours before they got off, a happy

excitement ran through her, and she grew scatterbrained and silly until they were alone with each other at 6:00.

*It's so extreme sometimes, she wrote. There's an uncontainable impulse or desire (or ache?) to see him, to touch him, to kiss him, that when I hug him it makes me feel like this is right where I'm supposed to be, like we've known each other so long. I get so unfocused and dizzy beforehand that I'm pressing the button for the wrong floor in the elevator and trying to push doors that you have to pull. And I should know I have to pull them because I've used them a thousand times. But I still push until I remember again. I love the feeling though because I know it'll just be us soon with the whole night ahead. How can I end this? I don't know if my job is worth it. Is it? I think I'm in love. And* while these five words stayed an hour after she put them down, her sudden waking brought along the sharpness of her blue-tipped pen, and again churned the idea into twisted rail lines.

\*

On the bridge, the DJ's voice began from the car speakers as the song faded out: "It's the Skipper here with you on this Friday afternoon, and man." He paused, moving into a tranquil, suave tone, "I hope wherever you are—the office, at home, in the car—that those windows open. Just a spectacular afternoon we've got here." The leisured pitch left and he resumed his radio voice: "Seventy-three here at Monument Square, and it's going to be nicer this weekend, folks. Sometimes," he reflected, "I wish we had this year-round. You know, piña coladas every day. Maybe we should all just pack up for, I don't know, Bermuda or Bahama. Come on, pretty mama," he laughed, "get out those bikinis

because beach time's almost here. You know, right now I'd look good in one; like an overweight, vitamin D-deficient dog in a hot dog bun."

Maggie felt her hair falling over her face, letting out a laugh, and looked in her rearview mirror to adjust her sunglasses as the DJ went on:

"I mean we all needed this, didn't we? And we deserve it."

"Hell yeah we do," Maggie said, still fiddling with her sunglasses and thinking about piña coladas and Will. Her liking him wasn't so hidden, even after she had talked to him about ending it—even after she had ended it. Other women in the office said they'd be a cute couple, furthering her interest. *But maybe they just want to see me fired*, she wrote in her journal. After all, it was only her fourth year at the firm and she was making better pay than any other paralegal. *Who the hell can walk away from \$64K? I can't risk it.*

"I think we all deserve this after that winter," the DJ said. "Really, what a winter we had. But have no fear; spring is here. So we can all breathe a little easier. Hell, we're practically getting a taste of summer today."

Will's green Civic again moved forward a few feet before braking hard. Maggie sat staring into the few yards of bridge between their vehicles, suddenly remembering New Year's, the intensity of it—their shadows pressing on the walls, his face in the glow of outside streetlamps. It had been four months since then, four months of small talk over coffee and lunch, of throwaway cups inked with exotic island palms, ocean, and sea life. She pictured herself there, lying next to him that night, naked under his arms and the thick covers of her bed, as the cheers and yells of drunken celebrators continued to bounce up from the thin cobblestone streets well into the morning.



*Afterward, maybe a half-hour later, he kissed me on the forehead, she wrote soon after he left on New Year's Day. He thought I was sleeping and he kissed me on the forehead. I didn't react. I just pretended to keep sleeping, like I didn't feel it. But I did, and I didn't know what to do except to keep pretending to sleep. It seemed like such an honest moment. It was so sincere. It felt like a moment that meant a lot. I didn't want to ruin it for him, to open my eyes and say "Thank you!" and "I'm awake!" And I'm not sure whether it was that he did it or that I stayed quiet, but something about it scared me.*

"How about some lovin'?" the DJ asked, pausing as if he were actually waiting for his audience to chime in. "I've got something from Mr. Spencer Davis here. And, honestly, I think some lovin' will get us back into that warm-weather feel. Here we go on Portland's only classic rock station."

As the six-note bass line steadied with the drum, and the organ shot in at a holy height, the driver-side door of Will's car opened.

"Hey!" Maggie joined in with the vocals.

Will stepped out, the same tune blaring from his opened door, with his white button-down still tucked into his dress pants and a loosened knot on his red collegiate tie—his Friday tie, Maggie called it. He smiled at the sun as he walked back to the trunk of his car. When he saw Maggie, his smile grew. Then he turned and opened the trunk. He reached in and grabbed his orange backpack, which held a water bottle in one netted pocket and a plastic bag always filled with granola or some cereal in the other. It was the same backpack he brought to work every day, the one that had earned him the nickname "College" from the partners. He turned again and looked at Maggie, still smiling as he swung it over his shoulders. He raised his hand with a small wave.

She smiled, laughing. “What the hell is he doing?” she thought aloud, taking her hand off the steering wheel to wave back. Then she raised her shoulders and hands, mouthing, “What the F?”

He dropped his arm and wrapped both his hands around the straps of the backpack. He nodded, still smiling wide, as though whispering about something ironic or memorable or sentimental. Then he said something to her, something like “See ya later,” only it wasn’t “later.”

The two lines of cars were both moving again, but Will’s car sat driverless in the right lane, his door still hanging open. Cars behind Maggie began honking and beeping and she looked back in her rearview mirror. An irritated man with his hand pressed against the horn finally let go and leaned his head out the window, and barked, “Get back in your car, asshole!”

Maggie looked ahead at Will. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pair of ten-dollar plastic red Ray-Bans, turning and looking out toward the bay as he slid them on and took a few steps back toward the left lane. Then, still smiling, he dashed forward. In two swift bounces he leaped up to the top of the side rail, then high and off into the blue sky—his arms outstretched as a skydiver’s, embracing the rush of air pressing against his face and through his opened fingers, and he disappeared beneath the cement siding.

“Holy shit.” Maggie jumped out and ran around her car to the side of the bridge. Others did the same, and a large crowd formed around the back of the green sedan, still blasting the Spencer Davis Group: “And I’m so glad you made it, so glad you made it.”

She stood with her hands flat against the steel guardrail, staring down into the dark bay water a hundred feet below. She watched the ripples swell out in all directions as the buoyant chorus carried on for a moment and then moved back into the bass line.

\*

*Maybe he made it*, she wrote in her journal two dozen times one night late in May, less than three weeks after Will was gone. She listened to the Spencer Davis song over and over trying to prevent her nervousness and fear with a three-minute dose of 60s pop, but it began to haunt her. Still, she couldn't go a week without listening to it. Rescue divers found his shoes out in the deep of Casco Bay, and a few days later his shirt and tie were pulled up on a lobster trap near Cape Elizabeth. But they never found his body, or his sunglasses, or his orange backpack.

The obituary in the Press Herald was pathetic, she thought. The only information it provided was his name, age, alma mater, hometown, and the name of the firm—as if the writer grabbed what he could from Will's Facebook profile and said, "Okay, this is good. It's all we need." It said, . . . *died tragically in what authorities believe was an extreme practical joke during afternoon traffic on the Casco Bay Bridge.*

*They're full of shit*, Maggie carved into her journal. *If they really think it was a joke, just a prank gone wrong, they're a bunch of fucking idiots.* The police had, after all, questioned the entire firm about their relationships with Will, especially Maggie—being that she was directly behind him in traffic that day. She didn't mention anything about sleeping with him or about dating him, fearing it would inevitably get back to the partners and she'd then be subject to some ex post facto firing, or maybe something worse.

“We were close,” she told the officer who interviewed her. “He was a really good friend.”

Over the summer months that followed, Maggie’s hope turned to guilt at times: *I let him die. I watched him die.* Then the loss grew to be her own as she remembered soft moments between them: *He held my hand at the movies. He gave me kisses while I slept. Do I hate myself so much that I would let him go?* These thoughts filled page after page of her journal until she stopped writing entirely. She pushed the composition book into the back of her dresser drawer in July, deciding she didn’t want to look at it again, that she didn’t want to think about Will and what-if’s.

On an afternoon at the end of August, Maggie sat at her office computer, staring at the language of another lawsuit against Burmen. Behind the onscreen document was a webpage she brought up every few days—days when the weight mounted and she missed Will the most. She had emailed the site to herself after she quit writing in her journal at night, and on those days she felt her life slipping into clocked hours she looked over the page, the updated flight listings to Antigua and Barbuda—dates, times, prices. She stared at them, sometimes for entire afternoons, until everyone else in the office had left and she could cry to herself in the empty break room. The way his lips moved when he looked at her that day, before he jumped, made her know he said something like, “See you there.” And she desperately hung onto the thought.

When Maggie knew no one else was around her desk, she clicked over to Will’s Facebook page. *See you in Barbuda*, she wrote in a message. But his profile hadn’t changed. It was filled with the *RIP*’s and *I miss you*’s of people he never mentioned, complete strangers to her, and probably to him, she thought. Then she moved to the break

room for a cup of coffee—something, anything, to wake her from the bout. When she returned she sat the cup down on her desk, scanning its blankness. She moved her mouse over the purchase button for a flight: Continental, one-way, transfer in Atlanta, leaves from PDX tomorrow morning. She stared hard at it, imagining Will lying under palm trees and coloring in the inked sketches of his Styrofoam cups, bringing them to life. There were so many cups she wished she had saved from the landfills that would never preserve his existence. They didn't belong there; they belonged on millionaires' shelves, in their viewing cabinets, or in museums. *Somewhere safe and preserved, somewhere they can be forever. For as long as Styrofoam lasts.*

She imagined seeing him. She imagined those first few seconds when she would find him in Barbuda, walking up to him on some sunny boundless beach next to waves that rippled with magic. Kissing him, hugging him, confessing that she loves him, that she always had.

She stared at the screen for a minute longer, still imagining the moment. Then, she pictured herself without her job, without her two-bedroom apartment. Without her parents two hours south in Waltham. She cried. And as she did, she set the cursor on the X in the corner of the screen, squinting through salty blurs at her blank Styrofoam cup, and clicked it.

## GOD'S ARM

The fifty-second time the rope comes for Baba Amin, he compliantly rises from the floor of the fetid dark to hasten the inevitable. He had for some time stopped fighting these ends. He steps out of the fetid dark and into sky. It blinds him as it always does: white-fire light smoldering his irises and then, *Oh, right*—he remembers squinting is not enough. As his eyes fight the influence, never fully unlocking, he allows the stranger to place the noose around his neck and pull it snug. Baba flinches, but that is all. Nothing like the cursing and wrestling he attacked with in the past, or the pleading and negotiating that came after. Every day Baba waits for the stranger wearing the black and featureless mask with eye and nostril holes too slim to reveal any distinction. And when he arrives, Baba dies. He accepts it now. Here is all there is.

It's been a long time since Baba came to this place. Weeks or months maybe—time moves strangely in the fetid dark, where death happens every day. And Baba kept track of the days at first. After each death he woke to wait his end again in the fetid dark, where the noxious decay of things he never saw offered the only diversion from fingering his way down endless icy walls of cratered stone.

When he first arrived he was drowned like a cat in a bucket of water, and he bit and clawed like one, too. In the final time he was drowned, he remembered his sister and his mother, as he came to do when his face was pressed into the brown water.

"Amara," Baba exhaled, imagining his sister skip into the river shallow near their home. He inhaled: "Mama," picturing her curved figure standing over him, waving him on to join his sister. The stranger's gloved hands pushed down again on Baba's head,

splashing him back into the bucket. “Amara,” his lungs filled. At last, the swallowed river water choked him with their absence. He longed for them now like the air.

\*

Next came the gun. All he ever saw of it was its thunder-cloud barrel, and when it caught the reflection of the white-fire light his eyes boiled and his brain swelled into shadows as he suffered to think one last clear thought. Only in the final time did a thought form, though. It was an image, from when he had first joined the army, of bullets spraying out of his own gun at men and girls. Their bodies meshed in red and slowly collapsing. It was raining.

\*

The worst of all, Baba believed at the time, was the machete. It was practically ceremonial for the stranger: toes then fingers, feet then hands, ears then nose, until Baba’s blood flowed so steadily that his heart ran dry. But the blood didn’t make Baba understand until the final time the tongue of the machete licked its way to his bone. It made him sick like he had been when he was fifteen, back in the foothills of Mount Rwenzori near the Congolese border, swinging God’s Arm through the elbow of a woman for the first time. But unlike then, the sickness in his belly never lessened, and each day when he woke he felt it again; the memory of it steadied in his thoughts. Baba still remembered the woman—an Amba woman, her lime headwrap stitched with sharp, earth-brown lines, her ears elfishly poking out, her round lips, and her dark and distant eyes. After that he remembered her often, with nausea and with anguish, never forgetting again that the girls and women had died by his untrue law.

\*

When the army invaded the Amba village all the men fled. The put-puts of machineguns from the older soldiers cut the runners down in a field of dirt just beyond Baba's sight. He looked later and saw the village's boys and men fallen over each other and it reminded him of the pits he dug for the drowned cats he had practiced murder on. It was the day he was given God's Arm.

"Take it," Joseph said.

Baba gazed at the great machete for a moment, watching a stranger's blood drip tip to handle, suddenly jubilant with the thought that Joseph would give him such a gift, the power, and before the other boys were allowed to touch anything but handguns. There had been talk that Baba would be a lieutenant, that he had what it took to be the leader of a new troop. But Baba had pushed it off to late-at-night thoughts, staring at the mosquito-net tent, until he finally saw the knife offered.

"Take it, Baba. Now. This is the arm of God. Do His justice." Joseph did not know as he pushed the machete into Baba's boy-hands that the knife would come to be known by many victims by that epithet—God's Arm. Baba would carve the words into its handle only a day later, at camp, as the other boys threw grenades into the river.

Joseph pointed to a hut. "There, He calls you. Go make use of His arm."

The ensemble of shrieks and brute cries around Baba fell to the earth as he followed the finger with his eyes and spotted three Army men holding down a woman, twenty-or-so years he figured, and ripping her clothes. Baba ran over.

"Boy," one of the men holding the woman called with a laugh. "You go, you go. We will hold her." Her arm pushed up with a yell at that moment but the man brought it back to the dirt with a grunt.



“We will kill your children if you move again,” one said hovering his face over hers, his hot-noon sweat oozing in beads onto her lips and eyes. She screamed for God.

Baba looked down at her—shame, but it lasted only a moment. Then he heard a baby, loud and alone like a dying bird. One of the other men emerged from the hut with it under his arm. His smile was wide. The woman screamed again.

“God,” she wailed. “Not my child. Have me. Have me. Leave her be.” She twisted back and forth on the ground. “Not my child. Please.” She was practically convulsing, biting at arms until she was smacked with the butt of a rifle—a drool of blood drawn from her forehead.

“Go, boy. Now,” one of the others said. “Are you a man?”

Baba scowled and nodded, “I am a man.” He took down his pants as the others separated the woman’s legs. She tried to yell again as he knelt before her, but after her left temple had met the hand of the rifle her voice could only quietly repeat her thoughts:

“A boy. He’s a boy. Do not make a boy do such a thing.”

The men holding her laughed. “A boy with a boy’s penis. What will you do with your boy-penis?” they hooted at him.

Baba’s heart beat like a hammer until his thoughts were sharp with rage. He reached for the woman’s breast and ripped the remainder of her shirt. He leaned over her.

“Go, boy,” the men shouted. “Take her evil body away from her.”

He stared at the woman’s breast and face. Her eyes were wide and she wept with hushed cringes. The black circle of her breast grew larger in his mind and he imagined killing her as he neared the end. The men cheered and she again cried for her child. So quickly he was done, but it was no matter to the men; they had another distraction:

“This is the devil shit she talks of,” the man with the baby said. “This is your bastard? We are to let it grow and know nothing of God’s commandments under its heathen mother?”

The woman shrieked—voice and thoughts now back in sync—as the man laid the child down meters away. Baba pushed his hand upon her naked breast and forced her down.

The man swung the gun around his back to his hands, glaring at the infant. “This devil is to inherit our land? Our country?” he yelled at her. “We are to leave all this for Satan and his army? What of God, woman?”

She continued to protest through wails and pleas. But with two cracks that carved the thick air with a whisk of certainty, the child was dead, and the man stepped on its face as the others lifted the woman’s head by her hair to look.

When she reached with her arm, Baba swung hard and fast with God’s, and God’s Arm left hers on the dirt. He stared at her fingers as they pushed and pulled, recoiling like the eyes of a decapitated chicken. The blood pulsed at first then flowed. An ill feeling swelled in Baba’s stomach.

“The boy cannot handle it,” one of the men yelled. “Look.”

The sickness flooded Baba’s insides and forced up his lunch.

“And yet, even now he’s still a boy,” the same man called out.

“And to think, Joseph promised a lieutenant,” another added. “Perhaps he meant for the boys with milk on their breath. Hail our boy-lieutenant.” The others roared with wide smiles and squinted eyes.

But their laughter enraged Baba. His fist clenched furiously around the handle of the knife until he held it as tightly as he could—the way he clenched when he strangled rats to face their bites. He moved from the puddle of olive-brown rice back to the woman. He stood over her, looking her in her eyes—wide and endless through the weepy niceties of their brown light. She spit at him through cries and Baba pressed God’s Arm to her throat.

“I am a man. Here is God’s arm. Here is His justice.” The machete moved across her throat with a deep cut. Baba stared at her eyes as the blood escaped the wound and the brown light died. The men, unsatisfied, strung her up as Baba looked on, absorbing the horror like sunshine.

\*

He remembers the woman again now as he steps out into sky. The stranger, dressed in his black cloak that gleams like polished coal, moves him toward the edge. Baba, with the noose around his throat, shuts his eyes. Then comes the push and Baba falls like a stone from a cliff, expecting for the fifty-second time the biting pull into the vacuum then the dark caves.

\*

After deaths by drowning and shooting and sawing, death came in the form of fire—burnings at the stake. Baba spit his vitriol at the stranger each time he lit the hay and wood before his final death by fire. In that final time, Baba cried out, pierced through his hands and feet with stakes like Christ, body sagging. And he asked the stranger, “Why, sir?” He pleaded his case: “Please,” Baba yelled. “See that I am sorry for the things I have done. I am sorry for what I have done, for the evil.”

The stranger stared at him through unseen eyes with torch in hand, and for a moment Baba thought it was over, all of it. He imagined the yellow walls of earth that made the homes in his mother's village look as though they rose directly from the dirt, and he pictured his mother and his sister, Amara, as they were when he was eleven, when he saw them last. Then the stranger leaned toward the hay and tilted the torch: "Here is your fire and it still burns."

It was the first time Baba heard the stranger speak. His voice was old and composed; he spoke deliberately, like a doctor or priest. And yet it seemed familiar to Baba, a voice he had heard everywhere and still could not place. He had little time to think it over, though, for the stranger lit the hay at Baba's feet and the volcano trickled up, toes to belly, before the last throes of wild lights whooshed him back into the fetid dark to wait again for some other shape of death. But stepping out of the unlit caves next, Baba realized he was led not by the stranger, but by men he knew in northern Uganda—army men whom he had led. He expected to speak with the stranger about the fire, about asking for forgiveness, about how to find an end. He had thought about the voice, which seemed so recognizable to him, imagining the wisdom and age beneath the mask—deep and older than Baba had lived to be. Instead, he found himself pleading with the men he remembered from the Army:

"Idi," he called to one, "Rao," to another. "You are my brothers. Let me go so I may help you to do His justice, the justice of God's good name."

It made no change in them.

"My men, I order you," and he did as he would when they fought for the army.

"Let me go. It is my command."

Still, it made no change. He reminded them of adventures and women, but nothing distracted them from their task. They took Baba like the women and girls he had taken over his fifteen years in the army, and pushed his face to the dirt.

“Vincent,” he yelled. “Vincent.” He spit up from the ground as boots kicked dirt into his face. “Do you remember when we were near Koboko? The first time, after Joseph was shot? We drank. We fished the river with grenades. Remember how we ate so well? I told you I would do anything for you men. I said I would die for you, Vincent.” He pushed the others away, but only for a moment. “We did His justice as brothers,” he argued as they grabbed him again. “For God, my brothers, let me go.”

No change.

Baba bit and yelled until his voice had lost its heart. And when the men finally finished with him, after they had each had a turn, and Baba lay half-paralyzed with broken ribs and jaw on his back facing skyward, they cut his throat and pissed on his face as he slid into death.

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All his past flashes in bright sky around him as he plummets toward the earth, noosed and clinching his teeth. Baba shuts his eyes as the ground nears. He expects the sting of what always comes at this moment: half-inch rope tightening through his neck and his head rolling backward until it stops and he stares at his shuddering, beheaded body for a few seconds, making no sensible reflection and without inclinations to breathe. Then he would hear the sounds of the women. He would hear the sounds of their children, and he would wake up back in the fetid dark, feeling for the endless cave walls that led nowhere and smelled of his own atrocities—burnt flesh, rotten knife wounds, and

gangrenous pools of still water. But before he hits the earth, the rope does something it had not done the previous fifty-one times. Snapping, the rope lets Baba fall to the dirt, landing hard on his feet and falling to his side.

When he opens his eyes, he expects nothing—the fetid dark. But he hadn’t felt the rope cut through him; in fact, he still feels the noose around his neck. And now he feels the sun, too. Its dazzle presses down around him onto desert and grassland, and as he stands he can see the roofs of houses in the distance.

*Uganda*, he thinks. “I am home.” Baba feels for the rope, but it too is now gone. “Merciful God,” he says. “Thank you. Thank you.” He looks to the sky to find the stranger, to thank him for the pardon, but only the sun looks down from the apex of unbounded blue, the white-fire light burning his irises: *Oh, right*.

He heads for the roofs of the village, occasionally glancing back at his own footsteps in the desert. They remind him of his death—his first death, his earth-death, when he was abandoned. It was the day he led the army into a village outside Koboko. He and the boys he had grown up with in training were all men, but Baba, as Joseph had ordained, was their leader. Baba and his men led the charge and they didn’t let the others down. Within twenty minutes every home was burned, every man over twelve was dead, and every woman was tied down or shot for her ugly age. The children that were not so young so as to have to foster and were not so old so as to never forget were all put into a single hut, the way Baba had been at eleven, while the army cleaned the village of its evil.

“Boy,” Baba shouted to a child as he waved his hand. “Come here.” He glanced down at the woman on the ground before him then back over. The boy trotted carrying his handgun like a basket of eggs, fretful and delicate.

“Are you a girl?” Baba hollered as the child approached. He repositioned his own rifle—another cord on his decorated shoulder. “Hold your pistol like a man. If you hold it like that you are unworthy of God; you should grow breasts and lie near this.” He pointed to the woman the others held at the ground.

The boy arrived, his arm still loose.

“Like this, you daughter,” Baba directed as he took hold of the boy’s arm and forced sturdiness upon it. The woman on the ground screamed and Baba smiled with an abrupt composure. “Quiet now, woman,” pointing God’s Arm to her throat. “Boy,” he turned back, God’s Arm still hovering over her. “It’s your turn. Become a man.” But a pop from the west opened a hole in the boy’s forehead and he fell. More put-puts of rifles suddenly diverted Baba’s attention, and as he turned to face the sounds he felt a sting in his gut. Then there was another in his shoulder. He fell to his knees as he watched the blue helmets appear from over a hill. “Blue men,” he shouted, lifting his arm hard to fight his gun into action, but the second bullet left it limp. Slowly, as his arm recognized its inability, his vision swayed and a final shot to his spine brought him to the dirt.

The bullets, like silver mosquitoes, zipped over his head leaving only distant cracks in the air as he stared skyward. *So bright*, he thought. *So blue*. And their buzz grew distant.

After a time—Baba wasn’t certain how long—he woke, realizing he had fallen asleep. He couldn’t move but the remote screams of gunfire echoed over him. He

managed to position his left fingers on his belly and he felt the watery warmth of his bleeding guts. Then a noise:

“Baba,” a voice said to him—familiar, but without a face.

“Idi,” Baba said. He tried to lift his head but his neck hadn’t the ability.

“Baba,” the voice repeated. And then he saw the man he knew it was, Idi, kneeling over him.

“Idi, brother,” he said as Idi’s warm, wet hand pressed against his cheek. “Help me up.”

Idi’s eyes, bloodshot and brown, glanced down Baba’s body, and Baba knew his life was being measured. “I am all right, Idi. I need to be tended to, but I am all right.”

Idi shook his head. “We are gone from here,” his hand still pressed on Baba’s cheek. “There will be more peacekeepers from Luvungi soon. They are crossing in from the Congo. We must go, Baba.”

“No,” Baba demanded. He shook off Idi’s wet palm and stared into his eyes with the sharpness reserved for women and men about to meet God’s Arm. “Idi, listen to me. Get men and help me. I and God will reward you for your service.”

Idi unfastened Baba’s fingers from the machete and lifted it. “God’s Arm will carry on, Baba.” And with that he fled.

Baba’s voice grew louder as he called for his subverting soldier: “Idi, get men. I will reward you, Idi. God will reward you for your assistance here.” The loping footfalls against the dirt faded. “Do not defy me, Idi, you shit. Do not defy God.”

Silence replaced the distant gunfire and soon Baba recognized he was alone, staring into the boom of sunshine that exhausted his eyes with a burning. The white-fire



light pressed onto his face like an iron and he tasted the dribbles of sweat as they oozed back from his chin. And that's when he felt the first bite. It hit at his ankle. *Oh, right*, he thought, remembering he had seen them in the villages after the army had finished. Then another hit at his shin. He yelled: "You shit." He knew what it was. Another bite came at his thigh, and again at his ankle. "You devil shits," he yelled. Then he saw one of the whiskered brown faces, its pointed snout shooting down from black beads for eyes, with its naked reed tale behind it as it crept nearer to his face. "You pest of Hell." In another moment the bites were at his arms. They weren't the bites of women or cats or even the smaller rats he strangled for practice; these were relished, not desperate. He felt these at the muscle. And then they found his belly. Panic moved over him like an eclipse, and in that shade of horror he felt his body unravel. His insides became like long rice and one eye was grabbed bit by bit like a small apple until he was blind and could only feel the rats bite and pull as they dug for a warmer portion. Darkness came with the brush of night, and when Baba opened his eyes again, cold walls he couldn't see in the fetid dark surrounded him.

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The desert footprints back to the place he landed when he fell from the sky are too many to consider. The village is within a half-kilometer now and nervousness creeps over him as he recalls again his own displaced history:

"Amara," Baba pictures himself, a boy at eleven, shouting as loudly as he ever could—a brother stretching his arms over an abruptly unsympathetic earth for his sister as a shrill composite of noises sweep in. Then, "Mama."

It's strange to suddenly remember this childhood before the army, his sister and his mother—memories expelled by the now to subconscious. Pictures from his youth flood his thoughts, as they often did while he drowned in the bucket, recalling the river they lived near. With the nervousness spiraling down his bones is a fastened hope to see them both again.

“Amara,” his sister's name breathes behind the wind. He hears the river of his childhood. *Amara*. It runs north to south just outside his village, just on the far side of his uncle's home, where he and his sister played and danced in the water like happy children of Paradise while their mother rinsed laundry and smiled on them.

“Mama,” he imagines again, her hands on the curve of her hips, a smile on her face.

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There, near the river, Baba sees his uncle's home, and his heart begins to pound like a hammer at a stake: *It is my village*. His mind shoots out one thought: *Run*. And he runs toward it. As he nears, the familiar put-puts of rifles begin and steady into a drumming, pounding out over a clash of women-shrieks and men's voices. But Baba doesn't stop. The hammer in his chest pounds quicker and a torrent of panic moves words out of his mouth. “Mama,” he hears himself. “Amara, I am coming.” But the put-puts and screams stop suddenly, and he arrives to bodies that lie like upturned fish after a grenade in a pool—cold and staring, peppered with holes. “Amara,” he yells again. “Amara. Mama.”

The red and black checkers of a collared shirt and the dead, bearded face above it make him know it is his uncle's body he passes entering the village, but he does not stop;

he moves as a bullet for his mother's home. The hammer beats faster against his insides, and his sweat oozes from each pore, soaking his clothes. When he finds his mother's home, behind a neighbor's burning chicken coop, he stops.

There is his mother. There is his sister. Dotted in red. Outside of their home, lying on the dirt, they both face skyward. But Amara breathes.

"Sister," Baba says falling, wrapping his arms around her. A sliver of red crosses her throat. "Amara."

Her eyes, wide and endless through the weepy niceties of their brown light, smile at him. "I love you." And as she breathes again the happiness he remembers escapes her, her breath fades into sky, and the brown light dies.

Baba screams between his tears, but only the stranger, now standing over him, is there to hear his whimpers. Baba sees the stranger's shadow and jumps.

"What have they done?" he demands, now on his feet and recognizing the cowed figure. "What have you let them do?"

The stranger is silent, but points to the ground near the feet of his family. Baba turns. There in the dirt is a machete—long and silver with a dried paste the color of rosewood at its tip. Baba grabs it and looks at the handle; his words, *God's Arm*, are cut into the wood.

"They have done this? My army? My men have done this to them?" Baba shouts raising the tongue of the knife to the air, ready to kill, and he looks back to the stranger for an answer.

Under the white-fire light, the blackness of the stranger's face and cloak again shine like polished coal. He says nothing.

“What do you say?” Baba orders. The spears in his eyes hone as they often did before he swung God’s Arm. “For Him, for His justice, I will kill all of them.” Then he turns back to the bodies and he is met with a terrible sight: the bodies, not only of his mother and sister, but also of every man and woman and youth, were now him—his own. Copies of his body lay in the dirt, bruised and sprinkled in red. Illness runs through him, to his fingertips, as he feels their deaths fizz in his blood and their virtues as clouts on his shoulders. Baba collapses to his knees as the sickness razes his insides. His hands fall forward, releasing the machete as he chokes on something deep within. His eyes begin to water. “They are my sister, my mother,” he chokes up, staring into the dirt. “They were all them, were myself.” He reaches for God’s Arm—the blade. “The Lord punishes me still. Here,” Baba says offering the machete to the stranger. “Finish me, my man, once and for all. Send me back to the dark, and keep me in it for eternity.” He presents the knife up higher. “Find my soldiers and bring them all there with me. Every one. Protect my sisters and my mothers, and my brothers and my fathers.”

“God,” the stranger says, spurning the knife. “God has no arms, gives none rebuke. God waits, that is all.” Then the stranger removes his cowl and Baba sees that he is a black man, as dark as himself. Then he removes his mask, and Baba sees it is himself.

He jumps to his feet, his belly still aching, and he screams in revulsive strain: “Me? It is me?” He blinks and in that instant of eyes shut the stranger has disappeared, leaving Baba holding both mask and machete, dressed in a habit of bright polished coal, and standing where the stranger stood.

Baba looks at his mask, then at his weapon that had earned the name God’s Arm, killing nearly half a thousand sisters and mothers and brothers and fathers. Its strength

was not solely in the steel, but in the fear its title carried. Remembering the women and children and boys who had died with easy swipes, Baba throws down the machete for the last time. He falls back to the earth beneath him, and he weeps. And he weeps for a long while, thinking of faces as sharp pains prick the skin of his fingers, his ears, and his face until feverish sobs finally pull him into sleep—long and excruciating, and thick with ancient memories of dancing in the river.

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When he wakes, only vaguely expecting the atrocities of the fetid dark, he is met by a familiar dying pink light and the shifting cold of evening. Here, there is no *Oh, right*; only the thought: *I am alive*, as the memory of death evaporates into an unutterable and then forgotten dream. His body is a bottle of sharp pains and numbness, and as he unlocks his eyes he realizes one will not open—that there is nothing to open. It is a throbbing vacuum of blackness, and the recognition sends a tremble into his brain. He hears foreign voices. *Americans*, he thinks, and as his good eye focuses, the silhouette of a body outlined in twilight moves over him. He motions to move his fingers to his machete, but it's gone. He remembers Idi—*Apostate!*—taking God's Arm and abandoning him as the face of a soldier in a blue UN helmet fills in the outline.

"A live one," the soldier calls out, stepping forward and tapping Baba's boot with his own. He moves his rifle over his shoulder as another silhouetted body comes into view. They talk for a moment, but their English moves too quickly for Baba to understand them. He only recognizes one saying to the other, "L-R-A" and "Dead." They talk for another minute, and then the first soldier crouches down over him.

“Rats,” the soldier says. “Panya.” He lifts his hands measuring the size of the pests that sift and chew the dead after the army’s purges, and then he brushes his cheeks to draw lines like whiskers. “The rats are going to eat you,” he says slowly. “Can you understand me? They’re going to pick you apart, piece by piece.” He leans closer, and lifts one of Baba’s arms. The touch feels strange, as if a wet sock was pulled over his wrist. “Already started,” the soldier says. “Kuona.” And as Baba’s hand comes into view he sees the bones of his thumb and fingers wrapped in dangling flesh and dried blood, the nails reduced to jagged glass hovering over black paste.

The other soldier moves closer. “Nothing we can do. Do you understand?”

Baba expands his lungs to speak, to shout, to say “No, no,” to beg the men to help him. His gut pangs and his eye begins to water. He finally gets it out in a dry moan:

“Help me.” The soldier still crouching over him drops Baba’s wrist back to the earth.

Baba focuses on the nametape on the stranger’s green-and-brown camouflage shirt. He studies the outline of the letters for a moment, searching his memories for their proper pronunciations. He remembers his mother showing him letters, trying to teach him English. He remembers Amara listening closely as the three of them sat together pronouncing words and singing rhymes. The soldier stands up and moves his rifle back into his arms. He begins to raise it to Baba’s forehead and says, “May God’ve mercy.”

Baba’s thoughts flood with a storm of dreams, some of memory and some of invention, and he’s dashing through them, finding his sister and mother over and over, in every corner. *Say the name!* “Ma–” he manages. He draws the rest of the letters in his mind, battling back from the watery faces of his thoughts—*Amara, Mama, Amara, Mama*. He hurries to find the pronunciation, the persuasive truth that will connect him to

this stranger: “Ma—.” And as he looks back at the nametape on the soldier’s shirt, the stitched black letters become clear. The pronunciation falls upon their sharp black edges. They spell *Martinez*, and the sudden knowledge swells from an aperture in his brain, shooting down toward his lungs and back up into his throat. He rushes the name out, achieving with all his energy an unremarkable, spittle-laced gasp. The soldier’s bullet has gone straight through Baba’s head and settled deep in the dirt behind him.

## PORTER'S CANVAS

Porter stepped back from his canvas as Renault called time. The other painters, twenty or so of whom Porter knew none, looked tired, some even mysteriously out of breath. A few threw down their brushes, stomped their canvases through and walked out of the hall swearing.

"It's too bad for you, really," Renault said to one, plucking the brush from his fingers and dropping it to the ground. "No more time."

Two who ran out of time didn't care to take down their canvases, but took hold of the easels and fled with the whole apparatus. Renault laughed at them and turned a hard stare toward the seven or eight still present.

He came to one that took an impressionist route, the canvas colored in dark blues, grays, and black, a moon almost dancing on the windows of a temple-like courthouse. "No!" he shouted at the girl—and she was only a girl. "It's shit," he cursed another whose painting seemed to perfectly flatter a blooming magnolia tree at a nearby window. "And inapt, besides." The hopeful disciples lowered their heads in shame or in anger, some wishing the old man certain kinds of pain—or wishing at least to have the hours back.

The night before, some of the invited competitors who had seen the task as an easy one started to lose their nerve. The assignment's straightforwardness began to flutter in their stomachs as they chitchatted over late-night whiskeys in the hotel's candlelit sunroom:

A painter who had come from Boston twirled the cocktail straw around his Sazerac and said, "These types of workshop contests are really just ridiculous, speaking



to nothing but one judge's subjectivity." He smiled to himself then glanced around at the group tightly packed onto the pillowed sofas. "We'll all go through the motions and Renault will beat his chest, make some noise, and pick whichever canvas connects with his own beliefs. Or worse, whichever painting he thinks another critic would like best. It's a charade that has little to do with knowledge or tradition and the result has no bearing on anyone's talent."

One of the others, a local woman from Metairie, turned her face with a frown and said, "Of course it does. If you haven't trained—if you haven't learned from the best—you can't really compete. Your brush won't make certain strokes. Each and every line is an argument for your position, your place."

"So," the Bostonian went on, "you're saying ignorance can't produce the same stroke?"

"Correct."

A few others who had been listening chimed in with grumbles of concurrence and dissent.

"May I ask, why are you here then?" she asked. "If it means nothing."

"Because," the Bostonian began then paused to sip his drink. "Because I was asked to be and because, as an artist, it's par for the course. But I'm also aware of its ridiculousness—or its fallacy, the self-ordained authority."

Never having been invited before to a workshop competition, Porter stayed out of the discussion, sitting quietly and rereading the prompt for the contest.

"Is that it?" the woman from Metairie asked, pointing to Porter's lap. "The assignment? Read it for us again, would you?"

He looked down at the piece of paper in the folder—one given to each painter at the beginning of the week: *“Two hours. Paint a draft in a movement of your choosing that honors your influences while maintaining relevance. Your subject must fit within the theme for this workshop period, which is ‘Painting the Law.’ You may interpret this theme broadly, as we have done all week. Be prepared to title your work.”*

“There. It’s straightforward,” said the Bostonian. “Pick a style, any style, paint a prison window or a cop car or a chain gang, and have something intellectual-sounding to call it in case Renault likes yours best.”

“Not so,” said the woman from Metairie. “It’s tasking you with demonstrating your knowledge, with making an argument for yourself. The theme is a vehicle. Naming it is naming yourself.”

The Bostonian smiled wide. “See? This is what I’m talking about. What does that even mean? Naming yourself.”

“It’s your name. You pick it,” a painter across from him added defensively. “Meaning that the work is an extension of yourself. I get it.”

“It’s two hours,” another one sitting at the end of a sofa repeated. “That’s not much.” And a silence set in, leaving the painters to rethink their individual plans of attack.

“It’s only a draft,” Porter said to break the stillness. A few laughed and went to get another drink; others went back to their rooms.

But that was the night before. Now, the reconsiderations and executions of strategies were all over and only two painters still stood by their drafts in the warehouse studio.

Renault approached the first canvas—the Bostonian’s. “Yes, all right,” Renault mumbled to himself. “Good light.” In it a magistrate of some kind sat centered between two suit-clad lawyers appearing to argue, their hands waving. Each detail was flawlessly real.

“What will you call it?”

“*A Language of the Birds*. I’ll call it *A Language of the Birds*.”

Renault nodded and patted the Bostonian on the shoulder. Then, with a turn of his shoes, he was staring at Porter’s.

“I think I timed it well,” Porter said with a timid step away from his work.

Renault began twisting his tongue around his cheeks. “What is this line here?” he thought aloud. Eyeing the old man’s rolling cheeks, Porter moved another step back, preparing for rejection, the failure of his art. He had known that Renault only had a slight affinity for abstract work, but given the vagueness of the theme, he figured it was as good an attempt as any.

“Yes.” Renault turned, put his hand on Porter’s shoulder and with a smile announced to the handful of representatives from the sponsoring society, Friends of the Algiers Courthouse, “Yes. This is our winner.”

The few onlookers clapped and awed—in bewilderment or appreciation, who knows?—as the Bostonian drew back his smile, scrutinizing the winning canvas.

Renault grinned at Porter. “What will you call it?” he asked with a finger to the patch of white hair on his chin. But he didn’t wait for a response; he carried on:

“Something shrewd, something that captures the complexity and the esoteric justness, the contemporaneity, something metaphoric—because you’ve got it, boy. You’ve got it all

here.” He pointed to a few of the lines. “And here, the sharpness in the administration, the hard lines. The abstraction is lost up close and its total form is revealed,” he waved his hands in front of it. “The path, the movement across the canvas,” he waved his hand again, “is pointed and yet, in its face, entirely inadvertent. A wandering labyrinth at a distance,” he said stepping back. “That abruptly seems not to be wandering at all up close.” He stepped forward again then pointed with a laugh to two opposite edges—the upper left and lower right—where brushstrokes had only faintly touched the whitespace, outlining them into empty feathers. “But the blankness of the sheet trying to creep up from beyond works to confirm its accidental logic. Move along, move along, it keeps saying.”

Porter looked over it again. He hadn’t given great thought to a title; he figured he would have been one of the first out the door. As the studio emptied, though, he had decided that if he were chosen, he would honor the moment with a title speaking to his experience over the past week. Now his heart beat as he worried about whether it would somehow backfire. “I think if you allow it, sir, I’d like to call it something specific, something that speaks to what I’ve seen this week. That is, to have the thing speak for itself and the task—*Risible is the Quitter*.”

“What did he say?” one spectator asked loudly.

The Bostonian looked toward Renault, waiting to see the old man react to the ridiculous specificity of Porter’s title.

“He said *Res ipsa loquitur*,” another spectator, a young man, asserted.

A third spectator asked, “And what does that mean?”

“It means the thing speaks for itself.” The young man looked around at his fellow Friends. “It’s for, I think, wrongful injuries. It means you don’t need evidence. That there’s an inference of negligence.”

Renault studied Porter’s face a moment then asked him, “*Res ipsa loquitur*, huh?”

Porter didn’t answer but looked at the spectators and the Bostonian who shook his head with an absurd smile across his face.

“Quite a title,” Renault said. “But it does seem to fit rather well, don’t you agree?” He smiled toward the representatives, stepping aside and inviting them to examine it up close.

The Friends tightened their eyes on the impossible colors—the electric pink, glow-stick blue and bright silver lines that busied the canvas like layers of electric earth then curved up along the right-hand side like a subway map and ran into a purpled bruise in the top-right corner. Each of them put the title in relation to the curves and vivid colors and blurry smudge.

The Bostonian stepped over to Porter and whispered, “That was preposterous.”

Porter smiled at him then looked fondly at the lower left-hand corner—at its very bottom. There, perhaps so finely that to point it out might destroy whatever attracted interest in his canvas, was the smallest origin from which, he imagined, the life of the lines swirled—his perfect black dot. As black as space. It was nothing at all but Porter was most proud of that insignificant, perfect pinpoint, its near invisibleness. “An inference of negligence,” he repeated, enjoying the sound of it.

## AN OCEAN HOLDS MY STORY

Outside a bar, beneath a coconut tree, deepening this second-week suntan, my toes dig into sand. Mr. Walcott tells me visual surprise is natural here in the Antilles, and I figure surprises to be like stories—new stories. He says, “it comes with the landscape, and faced with its beauty, the sigh of History dissolves.” I know he doesn’t mean my history or my sighs, but I dig my toes farther down and for the moment I know I’ve made the right choice; I never want to go back to New York. I think: ¡Viva Puerto Rico! Then I’m wondering about my toes again: how far down they can go. Doesn’t matter, I suppose. I sip my punch and rum a little more and farther down it goes until it’s just a hollow pull, an empty purple straw. But I have a relapsing thought, one of many since my marriage ended two years ago, since that story turned into sighs, and now more often since leaving home. The thought:

Sundays, our favorite days—my ex and I, when we’re together. We lie on the couch, legs tangled. She smiles a lot. She plays with my hair as I shut my eyes and start to dream against her chest. Dreams of us beneath the speckled night over Nassau from a trip we took. She looks like a healthy woman when she’s tan; like a true New Yorker when she’s not—too much discrepancy, maybe tedium. We take the dog for a long walk in the afternoon, downtown and back, holding hands, watching his brown tail swing. We kiss when I go into the store on Garden Street, Woody’s Market, for sandwiches or chips, or glass-bottled Cokes. “Not a single adventure between us,” she alleges one day. But I can’t answer her; our

lives fit together like a padlock and a whittled key. We kiss every time I go into the store.

And I miss her and I miss our dog. And I hate her. And I hate them both. I'd tell her now she was right. Now I have the beach and sun and a Spanish guitar I rest on a raised knee, its neck high and head even with my own. Now I have San Juan. I sigh.

Perhaps, I'll have another one. "Bar-ward," I command and I leave my friend, the Honourable Mr. Walcott, opened upside down on my beach chair. I'm up, back in the bar. Then, right there: Boom! She wasn't here before.

And she smiles wide on ginger-lily lips: "Señor? Can I help you?"

I'm sweating through this linen shirt I bought after I stepped off the plane—feels like yesterday. Fifty simoleons could have been spent in better ways, but it looks good on me. I take off my glasses and wipe my forehead. Now look cool. "Have I met you yet?" I ask as I place the plastic cup of orange ice and pulp down. I spread my hands against the counter's imitation alabaster stone. I know I haven't.

"No." She smiles. "I don't think so. Luna."

Luna, Luna—lovely sound. Her name means Moon. I shake her hand. She has enchanted irises, like brown galaxies that wheel round the space of pupils. "May I have one more, Moon?" I've been thinking that more is best at times like this, of these still unfamiliar Spanish afternoons, of heat, to halt the persistent sting of solitude; but now? To hope and speak with satellites! To toast the breadth of orbits, to fantasize! But my new position—catedrático asociado, sounding so grand—starts so soon. And what a pledge it is to write and read and teach, which is to admit, correctly, to studying

forever—a thing the ex never liked: husband as neophyte. Forget your sighs! There is some story, some surprise right here!

Luna laughs.

I think: She laughs, too! What geniality!

“So, where’s your compañera?”

“Girlfriend,” I convert. And I think of her, the ex, in Poughkeepsie somewhere. Forget her, man. Four better years will come sooner here. “Nowhere,” I say. “No existe—she preferred the snow. Me?” And I wave my hand toward that fluorescent brine, “El mar.” I don’t want to have to tell myself again: “It was for the best.”

Then Luna tells me, “Ah, sí. Este mar holds your story.”

But I don’t even try to think it through; instead I nod and say, “Un otro punch, por favor.” And she turns, her coral lips hidden toward the mixer. Island ladies, I wonder, must hate white men, all the Anglos coming through, harassingly nodding toward lips and hips and smiling and doubtless speaking no español, or speaking it poorly—like me. Jesus. Just like me. But I’m not some sexual tourist. I have to tell myself that again: I’m not a sexual tourist. I’m not some first-world invasive species eating up the local fauna. I am no lothario; I live here. Mi vida está aquí. And I’m going to stay well past when the sigh of history dissolves, as Mr. Walcott says, until the surprises of this isla are separated by decades and this story, this Trans-Am drama, is marked by years onto stone.

But este mar? Did she mean this ocean as it circles San Juan? Or was it metaphor or some idiom I should’ve known? ¡Ven acá! Come back! I hope she does. And she does, and I pull myself down into a stool.

We chat: “I just moved here,” I say. “For work, to teach. En la universidad.”



“And I’ve been here all my life,” she says. “No, momento—once I been to Nueva York.”

“Nueva York?” I say. “Bah. Exhaust and ice and screw you’s abound.”

“No, no.” She laughs again.

“No?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “OK,” now a nod. “Sí, I suppose.” And she moves a bottle of rum over my plastic cup. “So you teach. Teach qué? ¿Introducción al coqueteo?” And her accent is a rippling wave, but her upraised eyebrows and smile form some parody I don’t know.

“I don’t know,” with a nervous smile. “¿Cómo se dice coqueteo”—I struggle through the word, maybe from unfamiliarity, maybe from rum—“en inglés?”

And her smile turns true, and her eyebrows move to natural height. She lifts the bottle from the cup. “Flirting 101, I bet.”

Ha! What candor! “No, no,” I say. “Inglés. No coqueteo.” I watch her hands as she adds a slow tip of punch to my cup—smooth and long, nails half transparent and tipped in white. I think: ¿Cómo se dice French manicure en español? “I don’t mean to flirt,” I say, and what a lie it is. “I just don’t know anybody.” And I realize I’m gesturing too much with my arms. I bring them down to my sides. “I just—”

“Sí, sí,” she says, now mixing the juice and rum with a stirrer. “You just moved here. Yo sé. I know.” She pushes the drink toward me. “Well, if you are not flirting now, I would not want to meet you when you are.”

And we laugh, and soon she sneaks a drink to cheers me in this effort of rummy fun I've designed this day for—a last Friday before the semester begins, before becoming a tenure-track—not profesor, I don't remember the word—associate cataract.

She tells me she gets off later in the afternoon but I hear it as she's single, she's looking, that after night climbs over the waves our lips will make a pact and one night, many lunas from now, we'll share a home. What a desperate thing: Me: Luna, Luna.

“Will you have dinner with me?” I've never been so bold; I've never felt I had to be. But right now I have to be or else risk a week of gathering the grit. What if I come back and learn she quit or met someone? Or that the attraction wasn't shared, that it was just the liquor or the heat in the air?

She looks hard at me, analyzing, I think—determining whether I'm a rum-soaked cruise passenger, a seducer, or maybe an honest-to-God suitor. So I try to straighten my posture: back and neck; reduce that giddy smile. I imagine her eyes are searching my face for lines, inspecting my age. I'd guess she's twenty-eight or so, I think. I'm still under thirty-five.

“Sí. OK.”

And it all moves so fast. We're having dinner—myself the mahi, she the scampi. And oh, this place is good—La Cocina de some muchacho, I don't remember who—with drinks of exotic titles colored like sunrise and música, an acoustic nylon romance from two guitarristas and a boy on bongos in a khaki fedora; then lips on cheeks and “Adios,” adieu. But I want more. Not sex per se, not some kinky nightcap; but to know she knows that I want something more. I don't want to leave it, but I resign myself to the old rules I've largely forgotten or too long ignored.

So I wait two days, since I'm sure it's black-letter law in courting, and then I call her. On Monday we get cappuccinos at a small café with a wraparound porch. The façade is lime green and pink, like some Lilly Pulitzer plantation—my ex, obsessed with the designs of that woman I'm convinced doesn't really exist, would love it—and I hate it. But from where we sit, Luna and I can see the university, which is pretty from this distance, through palms and over small hills. She tells me she has an hermano named Lorenzo.

I keep sipping my cup uneasily because I feel I'm boring her. I missed my shot. "I'm sorry," I finally say as I pay the check. "Lo siento. I was nervous today. You look very beautiful." And she does. But I'm giving up. I'm only man; I can't pretend to know the riddle of the cosmos.

"Es OK," she says.

We finish and as I hug her adios, she pauses and she's close. She must see me glance at her lips because they twitch and I move mine toward them.

Then it's suddenly three weeks later and my classes have all been fine, my colleagues are kind, and my students are attentive? Must be the agua, I think, it's enchanted; or perhaps my plane was lost in the Bermuda Triangle and Rod Serling will walk into my office. Escorted by those dissonant guitar intervals, he'll say, "You crossed over" and I'll wake up shivering in my old car parked between snowbanks somewhere upstate.

Luna and I are at the movies sharing popcorn and a Coke—already having kissed, she says, "Who cares? We share." We do.

I think: What luck! We share that Coke and many more, along with tequila and Modelos and waters on nightstands, then car rides to Ponce to meet her padres, abuelos, tias and tios, primas and primos—so many people whose names I can't believe she remembers. She's a library, I think, and I call her my biblioteca.

The calendar says next Tuesday begins November, and she asks me if I'm sad that I became a resident, that I cannot vote for president anymore. I want to tell her that every citizen should be able to, that statehood would allow it; but she knows all this already. So instead I say I do better here: "I teach and that means more." But I want to see her smile. As we're lying down for a nap, I add, "Besides, I vote in the most important one." I pucker up. "With my lips." I kiss the air. "Every day en la elección del Amor." She laughs and I lean in: "Let me vote again."

"No. Una persona, un voto." She grins and pushes me back. Then: "OK." She lets me kiss her cheek. "When you do vote," she whispers, "vote to make it right."

And I do. We share more kisses and siestas, and a baptism gift for her niece named Sobrina—I ask: "Who the hell would name their daughter Niece?"

She laughs: "Sí, I know. Lorenzo."

We share more of ourselves and our mutual love for an hombre from La Mancha, despite having never read past Part One. We agree to want to know that sober and philosophical second part now; we read it together.

She tells me my story's with this ocean; I tell her she is my Dulcinea, that I want her to see me naked and performing one or two dozen mad acts, that they will take me less than half an hour. Her smile is a crescent light.

I have a relapsing thought in the shower but this is the first in five months, honestly. It flashes like an electrical surge charring the outlet:

The ex leans against the railing on the ferry for Liberty Park. The dog's leash is in her hand and he sits by her side, ears up, tongue out. She's wearing a purple windbreaker and from beneath the hood her hair flickers like silky fire-tips. Her eyes are the same color as the sky this day, and I remember because they change colors, from gray to blue to green. "Take a picture," she says. "It'll last longer." So I take out my phone. "Hold still," I say.

And I'm sad and I miss her. And I miss them both and I wish they were with me, just waiting in the other room. And then I hear her, the ex, in a scream. It might be that I've gotten water in my ear, so I try to shake it out. I hop a few times on one foot. But she did scream once, and I can't shake it out:

"I need something!" she shrieks, and it scares me. Her arms are in the air over her head and her hands are balled into fists. "Something! Some crazy love-adventure thing!" I think that was it; maybe, or—no or, that was it. That's why she left my things outside in that lonely cold. Poughkeepsie can keep her.

Now the shower runs cold. I am alive or else, I think, I am firmly dead—my head lying behind me somewhere on the asphalt road I took out of cold Poughkeepsie. My wristwatch on the sink counter says 11:52. It's time to sleep but right now I want that visual surprise that dissolves the sigh of history, and I remember my friend, Mr. Walcott. I get into bed and open his book. I ask him to solve the puzzle of the universe. He says,

“The sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over, apart from the ruins of sugar estates and abandoned forts.” At this I’m reassured. If there ever were a landscape that conquers history, it is the one of soft valleys and peaks lying next to me: my Moon and her swirling constellations.

But I know the ex was right about that thing, that one crazy love-adventure thing. And I hope she finds it, and I hope the dog is happy, because I know right now I have and right now I am. The old sighs, history’s solitary nights, have been risen over by a natural surprise—a landscape of Moon, who lights all San Juan.

It’s one year and we’re at our favorite restaurant. The muchacho is Miguel and his daughter serves us scampi and mahi and drinks made of liquors washed in dawn. The guitarristas are different now, but the king of the bongo is still the boy in the khaki fedora. We eat quietly, smiling, and I think: What a story we have! What a time the headstone’s hyphen can hold! I listen to the other tables, the language moving between couples, friends, and families. My mind wanders to something else Mr. Walcott told me. He said a visitor cannot love, that visiting is motion and love is still. But by staying with the landscape, a visitor is not a visitor anymore; he’s in stasis. And in stasis he’s a lover, a native to that particular patch of Earth.

I look at Luna and I think: I will become a native of this place. And I suddenly feel the urge to swim, to take her by the hand and run out into the night, down the beach, chasing the far-away curves of the coastline’s unbleached thread to a secluded bend in the moonlight, to at once forget the last of my sighs and uncover the natural surprises the landscape holds.

She smiles, catching me stare, and taps my half-empty dish with her knife. “Is it good?”

“Sí, always.” I focus on the celestial in her eyes.

At night, Luna leaves our bed—and it is *nuestra cama* now, and *nuestras* walls and windows. The white sheets draped across the mattress drag off my legs, following her like a glow over the floor. I step onto the lanai to smoke and there it is: the sudden roar of moon. It’s in my head: that first thought of Luna, Luna. A ways off in the ocean I see the water holds her freckled cheeks. Looking closely I even see the stars; they sway like tinsel on its black shell. It’s my story, I think, echoing the histories of stars, histories of exhilaration and tragedy that ride the rails of its waves. I say nothing, but stand and smoke and listen to the accent of its tide flirting with the island. Then I think: The historian is not a poet. The former recounts what was and what happened; the latter writes about what should’ve been and what may come to be. Staring at the moon in the sea, I think: Make me a poet, if anyone can be one.

I am stamping out my cigarette and I call, “Ice cream, *helado*, it sounds so very damn good,” and she asks do I like peach, papaya whip, double-chocolate brownie. I think: Delicious! She’s so specific! And I am not desperate at all in this moment, or filled with sighs and history. I am just a happy thing admiring the landscape.

The hopeful chirps of a frog at the open windows join the lapping surf a few hundred feet off. “Luna, my *biblioteca*,” I say as I crawl back into bed with a bowl, spoon, and scoops of all our favorite ice creams. “I’ve loved you since I was born. Since I first saw the night and knew that I live on Earth. And I will until I’m dead, until I’ve sail horizon-ward.”

She laughs, putting down her spoon. “Pobrecito.” She swims her fingers through my hair. “Te amo también.” And she wraps that reflected light around me, and reads in her rippling waves from our book: “Chapter forty-four.”

“Cuarenta y cuatro.”

“Sí.” She touches my cheek with the back of her hand. “Muy bien.” Then she looks again to the book. “It is stated,” she begins, “they say, in the true original of this history that when Cide Hamete came to write this chapter, his interpreter did not translate it as he wrote it—that is, as a kind of complaint the Moor made against himself for having taken in hand a story so dry and of so little variety as this of Don Quixote—”

I’m watching her lips pulling and pushing her accent against each word like waves on buoys. It is as stunning as an eclipse. I want to marry her.

“—for he found himself forced to speak perpetually of him and Sancho, without venturing to indulge in digressions and episodes more serious and more interesting. He said, too, that to go on, mind, hand, pen always restricted to writing upon one single subject, and speaking through the mouths of a few characters, was intolerable drudgery, the result of which was never equal to the author’s labor—”

“Luna,” I interrupt, licking my teeth, and I think: Right now! Ask her to marry you right now!

“¿Sí?” She drops the book to her lap and picks up her bowl of ice cream.

I daze a minute. To sleep in the warmth of Moon, sharing this pale sheet, is to know I’ve pictured this all so long; each star pointed here. But I know this night will be longed for soon, because no matter how hard I try I can’t ask her right now. Right now I’m thinking of history, of a story or just a sigh that takes place in New York. And now I



realize that I can never ask her because I am an old sugar estate, defunct and overrun by wildness; I am an abandoned fort, peeking through stones at the topography and surprises beyond. “Nada,” I say. “Te amo.”

“I know. Creo qué sí.” And she winks and licks her spoon as a wind blows through the windows. The pages flip backward and she lets out a huff. Then she turns us forward again; we move through time. “Aquí,” she says, stopping and beaming down onto the page. She lights the way for Don Quixote. “I think here is our place.”

The frog outside has stopped his singing and I look down at the cotton-white channel made by her shins. I ask: “Will we really read it all, Luna? This story,” and I tap at the pages of the thick hardcover in her lap. “Or will we end up skipping to the end?”

“Hush. Escuche. Listen.”

And I do. I listen to the ocean through the windows.

## FLOUNDERING AWE

Rel glanced over at his daughter in the passenger seat. Sleeping. The slow oranges and whites of sunlight rolled out, reaching upward. Claire's blonde hair hung like a hundred thousand rivulets pulled together by a yellow clip on one side of her face—positioned toward him, mouth agape. His wife at an early age, he thought. *She looks just like her—the lightness of her eyelashes, the rounded curves of her chin, that small nose that turns just so slightly up like a fingertip.* He'd said it before but only because that's what others said. He never believed it until now, until 6:20 this morning, five days after his pop had a seizure and didn't make it to the hospital on time.

He didn't know what a spitting image was, exactly. Did it have to spit up yellow Gerber applesauce? Did it have to be some fat-faced drooling tot? If it didn't, if it just looked beautiful and made a father believe he was the luckiest motherfucker on the planet, little Claire was a spitting image.

The air was still thick in early September, even in the morning. That's just how it was some years. But with cracked windows and the tilted-open sunroof came a whoosh of piney air that seemed cool enough, and it made him feel like it was 1987—a feeling he only got down past New Brunswick on the Parkway. There wasn't any real sense of nostalgia above Exit 129, or north of Rutgers. Even his exit had a newness that seven years hadn't beaten away. He and his wife moved up from LBI in the spring of '07, allowing her to commute to her new job in the city. Just thirty at the time and with a two year-old, she told him they needed money. She had wanted a baby for a few years but they had trouble getting pregnant. Six hundred dollars of fertility drugs and doctor appointments later, they did, in '05. And private school, college, summer camps, Disney

World—these were things she wanted to be able to provide, things they both wanted to be able to provide. But living in North Jersey, such privileges required something near six figures from one of them.

He had to swallow hard when Stefanie became the breadwinner, but she reminded him with a kiss and a smile that times are different now. And she was a good kisser. He said he loved her despite the Mr. Mom gig, “her duties,” and she told him she only got into the relationship for his old car—a beat-to-shit Mercury Bobcat he drove in high school. But it was where they first smoked pot together, and where they first felt the other’s nakedness under a blanket in the backseat. High school sweethearts.

When she was offered the paralegal job, they talked about moving to New York—they weren’t New Yorkers, they would never be New Yorkers. The air was different there. The water was different there. The cement and pigeons and dirt and sky were all different there. It was a different magic, one built skyward, and it was worth forty-five minutes on the train on a Friday night, forty-five minutes back at 6 a.m. on Saturday, but that was it. The pink glow that filtered out most of the stars at night, even twenty miles out, and the local news stations all broadcasting from Manhattan were enough New York.

When he was a kid, Rel and his pop always used to drive up the Parkway in the summers to go fishing with his uncle and cousins on a charter out of Atlantic Highlands. Even after his uncle decided to live off the land and bought acres somewhere down in Missouri, Rel and his pop kept going. Over the years, they got to know the guy who owned the boat—Tommy McSomething, real Irish, straight out of the potato fields. They got to know him so well that he used to let Rel drive them back in. His pop kept in touch

with the guy even after Rel went off to college in Pennsylvania. But Tommy passed away in 2000 or so.

*A good guy*, Rel thought. His eyes refocused on the road as he remembered the fluke he used to pull in—especially the last one on that boat, when Stefanie was there, sometime around '94. His pop was proud of him still, even at seventeen.

\*

“You don’t need to do that,” Rel said, lifting the line over the railing and watching the fluke at the end of it twist and tug.

“Do what?” Pop said, still patting him on the back.

“That.” Rel looked toward the arm beating at his shoulder blade.

Pop dropped his hand to his side and glanced over at Stefanie holding up her camera, crouching slightly.

“No!” she shouted. “I like it. Keep doing it, Pop.” She wound up the disposable Kodak and readied for another picture. “A shot of the fishermen. Say cheese.”

Rel and Pop turned and as they both smiled, Pop gave Rel a whack to his head. Stefanie snapped this picture and shot out a laugh. “I think I got it.”

“Seriously?” Rel said swinging around to look at Pop, not paying attention to the swing’s carry down the line in his hand. The fluke wasn’t on real well and it fell off the hook, falling to the deck and popping back up in twists and jerks until it hit Stefanie in the leg.

She jumped. “Ah, fuck!”

Rel reached out his leg and put his sneaker down on this fish. “Sorry, Stef. You okay?” She nodded and Rel looked back down at the fluke under the sole of his Reebok.

It was near the edge; another flip or two and it would've fallen back in. "See what you did, Pop?"

Pop smiled. "What I almost did." He looked over Rel's shoulder. "Would you make me a print of that, Stefanie? That'll be a keeper."

\*

Rel looked back over at Claire, still out, and thought about having a quick cigarette. *Smell would probably wake her*, he thought. *Let her sleep. She's had a rough couple days*. And suddenly he heard Stefanie's words from the night before:

"—rough couple of days. You don't need to take her. Just relax," she had said, putting her arms around him and kissing his forehead as he sat at their kitchen table, mourning and exhausted.

"It was three years ago that we went with Pop," Rel answered. "She was only six." He paused, remembering his pop sitting across the table from him at the diner the week before, spinning the pasta onto his fork with an unconscious precision. "We just talked about going again when we got lunch at Amici's."

He could sense Stefanie's look, eyeing his swollen face.

"Babe, I want you—"

"I want to go, Stef. Claire wants to go too. I just want to take her fishing."

"I know, I know." She moved her voice into a slow tone like a morning whisper: "Aurelio, I want you to be safe and relax." She looked up to the ceiling and he looked at her chin, softly rounded, smooth and perfect, and he leaned up and kissed it. Stefanie dropped her face again and pulled him into her, draping herself around him.

Before he woke Claire that morning to get her into the car, Rel had second thoughts about going. He thought, *Maybe we should put it off. She just lost her grandpop.* But he needed time with her, especially now. He needed to enjoy his time with her.

When she was six, the state tax hikes and shitty economy forced many in the homemaking crowd to give up the role and go back to work, effectively creating a new generation of latchkey types. But neither he nor Stefanie wanted that for Claire. “Three years,” they agreed. “Three years and that’s it. We just save and save and save, and after that one of us is home until she’s in college.”

“Daddy?” Claire said in a yawn. The sun was up now, bleaching away the last blots of night from the sky’s corners.

He glanced over. “Hey, Claire-Bear. You awake now?”

She nodded, “Yeah.”

“Good. We only have another twenty minutes or so. It’s not far. You ready to go fishing?” He tried to express some enthusiasm through his tone. In truth, he was excited, but he could feel the weight of the week sinking the morning and boat trip into a dreamy place from the moment he woke her up at 5:30—a place where eyes watch from an estranged distance, not minding the lines in the sea, where fisherman and their daughters eat lunch, think of Grandpop, and wish life weren’t the way it was.

“Yeah,” she said and turned her face toward the window.

He looked again at her. As she stared out, he saw her five years on: post-pubescent, hair dyed some Crayola color, thinking deeper about the psychological affliction of mortality; then ten: home from college, some asshole practice-boyfriend; twenty: married, professional, two kids, a mortgage; forty: a different time, technology,

America, but the same her—unique from the social spam and still the prettiest; until he couldn't see any farther. And in each moment he saw his wife, her prettiness, kindness, vulnerabilities, and her privileges—the things he failed to provide.

“I wish Grandpop was here with us.”

Rel's eyes widened and with the name, right there in front of him, he saw his pop—his face as colorful as he was before the wake, before his body turned into an empty shell with a new suit and makeup on. His clothing was as crisp as it had been since Rel's mother died—the sweater-vest, collared shirt; his hair, sparse and paper-white, slicked back. He was ahead of the car, almost gliding before it, and the white dash-lines of the lane seemed to brake off the asphalt like Lego pieces and they floated up off behind the car as the road fell away beneath him and the car continued, feeling airborne. His pop's figure was so clear that Rel almost swerved to miss him. He didn't walk or run; he just stood still, moving with the car—or not moving. *Is the car moving?* Rel blinked: *Where's the road? I don't feel the road.* He heard his pop's voice and watched his lips move.

“Enjoy it,” his pop said. “I got her in sight.” The way he said it was unbearably casual, like he was babysitting Claire for the weekend.

Rel blinked again. The road was there; the lane markings were there; his pop was gone. “What?” he asked aloud, still staring openmouthed ahead toward the empty asphalt. *Jesus, I could've killed us*, he thought as his eyes darted between the white lines of the lane. In fact, the apparition was so real that his left hand pulled the wheel slightly toward the median before the vision disappeared.

Claire straightened herself and picked up her bottle of orange juice from the cup-holder. “I said I wish Grandpop was still here—going fishing with us.” She breathed out loudly, adding sound with a curl of her lips. “Sorry, Daddy. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Rel felt his heart steadying into a wild pace. “I know, sweetie. I do too.” He almost heard it beating.

He glanced down at the fuel gauge. Half a tank. “We have to stop and get gas.” But he didn’t need gas; they were only fifteen minutes away. He needed to get away from the wheel—the eyes and mind abruptly feeling like a single unreliable thing—and he needed to stand up. “I need some Red Bull to get the day going,” he added, trying to justify the lie without thinking whether she noticed or cared. His voice was stammering as he tried to reason away the stop: “I need wings for those flying fish.”

“But Mommy gave you coffee,” Claire said, picking through the backpack in front of her. She stopped and lifted up his iced coffee from the other cup-holder. “We don’t need to stop. Look.” She shook the ice inside his clear tumbler—half a venti’s worth of coffee swirling around ice cubes shaped like Han Solo in carbonite. “See? There’s still like four Han Solos in there too, not even melted.”

Rel felt weak. If he didn’t pull over soon he thought he was going to die or, worse, drive the both of them into a bridge pillar. “I know, honey. But I need something stronger”—*What a fucking message to give your daughter, Aurelio*. “I mean I need to get gas now so we don’t have to stop on our way back home, and I like Red Bull better”—*Lie*. “Plus, it’s supporting our team, right? Let’s go Red Bulls,” he crooned, tapping his hand against the wheel to get the rhythm of the stadium chant. Claire was a soccer girl, and since she turned six or so season they bought season tickets annually—another



provision on Stefanie's list. They weren't preposterously expensive yet, and that was the draw, he guessed.

"Yeah, I suspect you're right," Claire said.

He wondered if he'd ever heard her say 'suspect' before, then he wondered if Stefanie had. It might've been a first. *She's so damn smart*, he thought. *Smarter than me*.

\*

As they boarded the boat, Rel watched Claire carry the tackle box ahead of him. Still thinking of the crispness of his pop's image in front of the car, his mind backstepped to a forgotten year: he saw himself in Claire and felt like his pop, the air carrying the opening notes of Bon Jovi's "I'll Be There for You" and the whirring of DeLoreans. "Holy shit," he mumbled, low enough to make certain Claire couldn't hear. She kept walking until finally stopping at a shady spot near the bow—*Sure to be sun-covered in a few hours, depending on the direction*, he thought.

"Is this good?" Claire asked, turning with the tackle box at knee-height, her backpack swung over one shoulder.

*She's me*. That disaffecting identification had eluded him throughout Claire's childhood. Not Stefanie though, perhaps by nature of a shared sex. But it hadn't come for him until now. And it was suddenly so goddamn obvious. There was no eluding it anymore. She was him too—spitting image and all that.

Claire was ten or more feet from the bow, starboard side. "I think this'll be a good spot."

Rel pushed out other considerations to focus on the spot alone. "Yup," he said. "Great choice." He looked out toward the water and memory splashed back in. "This'll

be perfect,” he said as he put the poles into their fixed holders, forgetting the passage of decades and the reality around him for a moment.

The water by the docks was a runny brown cream, and after it caught his eye the past left him. He pushed their bag of lunch beneath the bench seat and sat down, leaning forward and resting his arms on the railing. “No wonder that dolphin died in Brooklyn,” he muttered, staring at the thick water and inhaling the unmistakable smell of dead fish. An empty plastic Diet Coke bottle sat perfectly still in one section, unmoving as if it were wedged in Jell-O.

“Dolphin?” Claire jumped.

“No, no. Sorry, honey. I was just thinking about something.” He paused and changed his tone: “We might see a pod of dolphins when we get out there, though.” He leaned back again and put his arm around her. “I used to see dolphins all the time out here. You have to keep your eyes open for them.”

She slumped back against his arm and they sat silently for a moment. “You meant the dolphin that died in the Gowanus Canal, right?”

Rel didn’t say anything, instead mulling over the fact that she pronounced Gowanus correctly, that she knew there was a Gowanus at all.

“In Brooklyn.”

His muscles tightened and he let the discomfort out through wiggling his fingertips as he tried to remember everything he had read about its death in some online article. “That was terrible. Poor guy. But I think that dolphin was older, though. It wasn’t just the water, I don’t think.”

Claire pushed her head back into his arm and sat still for a minute, just staring ahead. “People have ruined the earth,” she said quietly. She took another breath and said, “We fucked it up.”

At first, Rel almost jumped—from heels to abdomen to skull, everything tightened toward a leap; a leap to nowhere in particular, just somewhere to escape the moment. He wanted to get out of there or smack her, imagining in the milliseconds that passed how Stefanie would deal with it. *She should be the one to deal with it*, he thought. Instead of leaping, or because he had no option to leap, he turned his head toward his daughter.

“Claire,” his voice moved with severity. “You don’t say that word.” His mouth moved quicker and quicker, without time for analysis or word-choice. “That word’s just a front for a lack of vocabulary. It shows that you don’t know how to speak well.” He tightened his fingers around her shoulder. “And the people that use those words are the ones who end up getting into trouble—at school, at home, at work; they don’t graduate from high school, let alone college, because their language is so limited. But more importantly, your mom and I don’t—”

Claire pushed her head into his arm and tilted it toward him. “I’m sorry, Daddy.” She pulled back and looked out toward the brown Atlantic. “I didn’t mean to.” There was sincerity in her voice, and Rel’s unease fell away. “I know I shouldn’t have said it. Curse words are bad, and I know I know better.”

He didn’t expect to interrupt this moment for her, an apology being so important, but his thoughts moved to what Stefanie would say and he confessed to himself that he was motherly, wondering if all fathers had a motherly instinct or if it was just him, a

product of homemaker duties. “It’s okay, honey. You’re not in trouble.” He kissed her forehead. “Just don’t use that word.” Then he thought: *Until you’re eighteen and in college.*

Within minutes the boat was headed out. It wasn’t a particularly big group of people for a Friday morning. Maybe twenty or twenty-two. Not enough to make him feel crowded and anxious like it did sometimes, especially around the summer holidays when all the New Yorkers came down. Twelve or so miles south of the Verrazano, the pollution of the whole metropolitan area seemed to shade the shallows with an umber canopy—*Or maybe it runs all the way down*, Rel thought. *Maybe every inch of ocean down to the sand gets thicker and thicker: a stew, then a barely penetrable brown jelly, then a section of accumulated waste, solid as cement.*

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It was just past noon and the humidity was reaching its highest. Rel swiped at the sweat on his face with a bunched-up bandana, sipping a bottle of water. A few people had pulled in sea robins, a horseshoe crab; some jackass even caught a stingray. But it was a charter for fluke, and only four or five guys had caught keepers—no streaks like Rel had seen on past trips. Years ago, maybe the early ’90s, he and his pop were on Tommy’s boat and they went forty-five minutes reeling in, casting out, and reeling in. They pulled in nineteen fish—so many they filled two buckets and ended up giving six away to other guys on the boat.

Then Claire’s line caught his eye. A tug. Another. “Look,” he whispered to her.

“You think I have one?” she asked, standing up from the bench seat. She put her hands on the railing on either side of the pole, still in the holder. Another tug.

“Pick it up slowly,” he said. She did, carefully and, he thought, professionally.

“Net!” someone shouted from the hull. Other voices followed the order: “Net! Net!”

Her line took out. “It might be caught,” he said, justifying the calls from the back of the boat. “Now just reel once and give it a quick tug up.”

She did. “Like that?”

“Perfect. Yeah. Good job.” The rod bent as exclamations and praise erupted from the back of the boat. “Nope,” he said looking toward the cheers. “It’s not caught. You’ve got one on there, hon.” He leaned over the rail. “Reel.”

She started.

“Reel, reel, reel.”

“I am,” she answered, pushing and pulling the handle in a stroppy motion.

He watched the water until the tan shape of the fish came up. “It’s a fluke. You got a fluke,” he said. He turned toward the hull. “Net!” he shouted. “Net!”

One of the hands came around, a teenaged kid, as Rel and his daughter watched the fish twist and turn under the rolling surface. “Here,” the boy said. He stepped up to the railing and leaned the long handle out over the water, positioning the net without much thought. With a scoop, it was in the air and then on the boat.

“Is it a keeper?” Claire asked as the boy grabbed the fish by its body and twisted the hook out of its lip. She put her hand to her lip, pushing against the corner with her index finger. “Do you think that hurts a lot?”

At that, the boy looked up smiling and repeated, “Does it hurt?” He glanced at Rel then again at Claire, and finally focused again on the fish. “Well, you can ask him,” he

proposed with a laugh. “Keeper, for sure,” he said to Rel, not measuring it. “But no,” he turned back to Claire. “Not like it would you or me.” He smiled again. “Just think of them as little machines. Ocean robots.” He put the fish in a bucket for Rel.

When he left, Claire turned to her father. “I don’t feel like fishing anymore.”

“You sure?” he asked. He glanced at his phone. “We still have another hour before we start to head in.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” She sat next to the bucket and stared in at the fish.

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The fluke had been in the bucket for about twenty minutes. Rel saw Claire watching it closely as he began to doze. Its gills were moving slower now, but he imagined that she gave the greatest attention to its eyes. He remembered seeing flukes’ eyes for the first time—so alien to be on one side, those horror-tilted eyes. He heard her say the word “Fluke” a few times, softly and slowly, under her breath as if to hide it. He looked to check on her again. She was still hovering over the bucket, whispering, as if she were talking to the fish, as if she could hear it. Rel didn’t hear anything extraordinary. He shut his eyes and tried to remember his last lunch with his pop.

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Rel took a sip of his root beer, watching Pop’s hands—veiny and marked by age. He looked at his own and thought about how much they’d changed already.

Pop went back to spinning his pasta. “You remember that day down in Saint Thomas,” he began. “When it rained like a showerhead for thirty minutes then stopped and was sunny for an hour, then rained again, then sunny, and it kept doing that all day?” As he put the coil of spaghetti in his mouth, he laughed.

The trip had been six months ago. Rel adjusted himself on the vinyl booth seat and nodded. “Sure, why?”

Pop kept chewing: “That was the best day of the whole trip.”

Rel thought about it, picturing Stef and Pop with Claire on his lap sitting on the balcony outside their hotel room overlooking the cruise-ship dock and Hassel Island—where they heard MTV had recently shot a season of *Real World*, which Rel couldn’t believe was still going. The rain was so loud no one bothered to speak. “Why do you say that?”

Pop swallowed his spaghetti and glanced out the window. “Just peaceful.” He smiled and waited a moment. “Actually, it’s funny. I made Claire promise not to say anything.” He paused and looked back at Rel.

“Say what?” Rel’s lips and face tightened.

“Relax, Rel.” Pop started spinning another spool of pasta. “That’s good that she kept it. Anyway, you and Stefanie went to sleep. So she and I decided to go for a walk. Just down to Pizza Hut, you know? To get a slice.” He grabbed the plastic cylinder of red pepper and shook some out over his dish. “We got stuck watching the angelfish down in the aquarium, though, so by the time we got there, they were closed.”

Rel let out a sharp breath. “Could’ve been dangerous, you know. Taking her out that late.”

“Who’s going to come at an old guy and a little girl? Seriously.” Pop put the red pepper down and rested his fork on the plate, still twirled up. “Nobody. Eh, maybe somebody.”

“Yeah, somebody. That’s all it takes.”

“Somebody somewhere sometime not then. All right?” He sipped his root beer.

“So we kept walking.”

Rel brought his hand up to his mouth and rubbed it over his beard. “You kept walking.”

Pop shrugged. “Sure.”

“How far did you go, Pop.”

He lifted the fork from the plate and ate it. Rel sat back and watched, waiting. Pop smirked, still chewing. “Not far.”

“Okay, just tell me, Pop.”

He finished chewing. “We stopped off at that place—what was it? Gringos?”

“Greengo’s, the bar?” Rel pulled the bottom of his plate toward him.

“Played darts till one. Caught a taxi back. She’s good at sneaking in. Better watch out for that.”

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Rel heard a small voice, distant at first, like a fading memory from a dream. Then he heard it again: “Help. Help me, please.”

His eyes opened. “Claire?” He looked around and spotted her down near the stern standing with the deckhand and a guy pulling up another horseshoe crab. Then he heard the voice again, gasping, and he looked over into the bucket.

The fluke was still there, bent slightly like an L, with its eyes staring up, gulping the thick surface-water in the bucket for what little oxygen was left. Its mouth opened and closed, opened and closed. *Is it making a noise?*

“Let me go,” it said.



Rel didn't react. Instead he moved his eyes back to Claire then turned slowly in his seat and glanced behind him. Nobody was around.

"You four-finned eyesore," he heard it say. Its voice was low but it was so clear, like it was sitting on his shoulder. "This place is dry and burning."

Rel turned back toward the ocean. *Fish*, he thought.

The fluke raised its small voice a notch: "Let me go, please!"

"Shut up," Rel said. He looked back to the fluke. "Shut up. We don't talk. Do you understand?"

The fluke tried to flip itself, anything to rock the bucket just enough. Some of the milky seawater splashed over onto Rel's leg. He watched it dribble down to his ankle and stop at his sock. It sat against his skin atop the sock for a few seconds before absorbing into the cotton.

"Say something," the fluke demanded.

Rel leaned back in the bench seat. He felt a turn in his stomach. *Am I getting seasick?* He rubbed his belly. *Just anxiety probably. It's been too much. I'm doing too much.*

"Please." The fish splashed again.

Rel shushed it. "I don't know what to tell you. I'm a fisherman, you're a fish. We don't talk."

The fish turned in the water with another splash. "Fisherman?" It almost sounded like a laugh, like a gargled laugh. "You are not the measure of creation. I am beyond you."

Rel put his face in his hands. "That's some attitude you got, fish."

“Beyond you,” the fluke repeated.

Rel dropped his arms and glared hard into the bucket. “Beyond where?”

“Why are you bigger than the other fisherman? The one who pulled me here. Why are your fins longer? Why have you taken me to this terrible place?”

Rel shook his head. “I’m a man. That was my daughter.” He looked over at Claire still with the horseshoe crab, reaching her hand out and running her fingers down its spiny shell. “That was my child, my offspring. Get it? Men are bigger.”

“Why have you taken me here, man?”

Rel’s eyes squinted. “We’re fishing. It’s a fishing trip. So we fish.” The fluke seemed to nod toward Rel’s hands. He was fidgeting with a piece of squid he picked up between his fingers.

“Is this what you’re doing? That’s your try at fishing?”

Rel shook his head again: *No wonder you’re all dying*. “Fishing is catching you.” He nodded toward the poles. “That’s what we used to catch you, those tall things. You think you’re having a free meal—when you see some squid just hanging in the water?” He dangled the piece in his hand over the bucket then dropped it in. “Like this.” The piece of squid landed between the fish’s eyes and slid down its body to the bottom of the bucket. “There’s a hook in it, and when you eat it, the fisherman pulls, and the hook catches you and we reel you in.” The fluke’s eyes moved oddly. *Is he making sense of this?*

“Why?” The hostility in its voice shrank away, leaving only a distressed plea:

“Why? Why have you caught me with a hook?”

“Caught,” Rel said. “That’s how people catch fish.”

The fish ignored him and continued, “What is people?”

Rel grumbled, “Come on.” He looked around again and breathed slowly. *Maybe, he thought, it’ll just shut up.*

“What is people?”

“All of us, all the fisherman in the world. We’re not all fisherman, but we’re all people. Get it?”

The fish turned again, gasping. “I’m losing my breath!” It was almost shouting but nobody looked. “Why have you reeled me in, people? What do you intend to do to me?”

At this Rel fell into thought. *If I tell him I’m going to fillet him into little slices of meat, cover him in egg yolk and breadcrumbs, and fry him, maybe it’ll stop.* He looked at the fluke again. It seemed so pathetic, opening and closing its mouth. Rel decided to have his question answered first: “Tell me, where beyond are you from?”

“Beyond? Yes, beyond your universe. Just please, please let me go.”

He lowered his voice even further, looking around to ensure nobody was watching him talk to a fish in a bucket. “You’re not from beyond the universe; the universe is everything.” He looked away from the fluke, thinking maybe this had gone on too long, maybe he needed to stand up and walk away, wait until it was dead to come back.

The fluke shuddered in a wave and the water splashed again. “I am, I am. All of us are.”

“Oh yeah?” Rel’s eyebrows raised and his forehead crinkled. “Beyond the universe. You know all the answers. You know God?” His thoughts moved back to his

pop and he suddenly couldn't tell whether he had asked the question sarcastically or sincerely.

The fluke seemed to think it over. "I will not lie to you, man. I know exactly what I am. If he is a fisherman, I suspect some I've known know him by now."

Rel pulled away from the bucket, surprised by the answer. He imagined God fishing and smiled. "All right then."

Just then Claire came bouncing back up the boat toward him. He glanced at the fluke one last time, hoping it would keep its mouth shut.

"Everything all right, Claire-Bear?"

She sat between him and the bucket on the deck, turned up with a smile, wide and satisfied. "Yup." She plunged forward and kissed her father on the cheek. He put his arms around her and hugged her.

"You want to fish again?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I've decided that I'm not a fisherman."

"You're not?" he asked with parental appeasement. "Well, they are ugly fish, aren't they?" He leaned his head back. *Fish*, he thought again.

Claire shook her head. "No, I think they're cool-looking."

"All right," he said. And he shut his eyes. After a minute or two, he felt Claire slip out from under his arm. He peeked out of the corner of his eye to watch her. She leaned over the bucket to look at the fish. Rel could see the rim of the water, brown and cloudy.

"I will let you go, fluke," Claire said, reaching in and picking up the fish. Rel watched. He wanted to say something but he suddenly couldn't. The fluke's mucous pressed against her fingers and palms, its body beat against her hand, leaping little life-

throbs toward the Atlantic, and Rel could only watch. A brown and dirty-looking thing with wandering eyes on one side, Claire didn't seem to care; she kissed it, and slid it off the side of the boat, back into its universe. Rel didn't say anything, he just watched. He heard it splash then a "Whoa!" from the stern of the boat. Claire stood at the railing, looking down into the water.

When she turned, he said calmly, "Claire."

"Yeah?" she moved back under his arm.

"Why did you do that?"

She whispered, "Because he looked sad and we don't need to eat him. And he was starting to not breathe good."

"Well," he said.

She ignored it.

## OUR PLACE

For the last several weeks—four by Tom’s count, five or six by others’—the residents at Magnolia Palms Apartments have been watching a white Ford F-150 with an Arkansas plate that’s been parked in the visitor lot near the dumpster, just past the back entrance and right outside Tom’s bedroom window. All of them walk by the lot or through it to take out their trash or walk their dogs.

They’re pet-friendly apartments, which is how Tom ended up here. It’s a nice place, with a lake that stretches past three of the buildings, from the front entrance to the back. The six other buildings—all three stories high, six apartments on each level—are behind those front three by the lake, spaced out by a winding road that makes loops around the mailboxes and, all the way in the back, a dog park. That’s how pet-friendly they are—a dog park. It’s just some mulch thrown down in a fenced-in square adjacent to an equally mulched fenced-in jungle gym for the little kids. The dog park is shit-riddled but I don’t want to talk the place down. Tom likes it. It even has a pool and a volleyball court and residents or folks who live nearby can fish in the lake if they want to catch a turtle or a something-fish. Probably a something they shouldn’t eat.

There are a bunch of students from the university that live here but it’s mostly a young professional crowd—people Tom sees in suits or scrubs in the mornings when he’s taking out his yellow Lab, Jax, for the first walk of the day. It’s pleasant in the mornings, cold even; not as hot as what he anticipated moving to the Deep South. But the heat shifts in quickly over the course of the day, even in February.

Since moving to Mississippi two years ago, Tom learned that seeing the same obnoxiously sized pick-up in four different colors parked in a row at an apartment

complex isn't as rare as a person might expect. The Hulk could fit in one of these tanks and drive if he could just ease up on the rage and flip the turn signal. That's not to say Tom didn't see trucks like these growing up in Wilmington or in Amherst, Mass., while he was in college. They're in the north, too. There are just fewer of them up there, at least it seems to him. And people down here generally don't use their turn signals much. After the first few months, he began to think he took the common courtesy of signaling for granted back in the northeast. Even the Jersey drivers and Massholes weaving in and out of traffic on I-95 would use their signals most days. Anyway, one of these behemoth trucks has been sitting in the visitor lot at Magnolia Palms Apartments for at least four weeks with three dogs inside of it.

Tom doesn't attribute this fact to the location—that is, it being the Deep South—or for that matter to the people of his adopted corner of it: just a fingertip northeast of New Orleans, the Coast. But for a state that's largely regarded from the outside as being full of conservative, gun-toting types, I suppose it can be a happy experience to find a welcoming niche. Honestly, it's pretty liberal when it comes to some of our laws. Tom thinks so, too. There's just some blurring of lines when it comes to conservative and liberal, and liberalness and freedom, or so we decided one night at our hangout spot, this dive bar off First Street called Our Place & Pizza. The pizza is crap, probably made from the cheapest stuff at Walmart. But the place has character and cute undergrad waitresses. The wood-plank walls inside are painted bright blues and greens, giving it a coastal feel, but it's peeling off in all the spots not covered by tin Evacuation Route signs and Scotch-taped posters of Blues players.

Once Tom got to know the spots to go for good nights, like Our Place & Pizza, he found his niche. Some months ago he even found a good-looking local girl, an undergrad nursing major from Biloxi who was working at Our Place three nights a week. She was a lot younger than him, and it bothered him at first. I don't mean too young; she could vote—I'm not talking legality here. But he grew hesitant when she told him she was 20, he being 28. Come to think of it, she probably shouldn't have been serving beer. I wonder now if that's common at dive bars.

There are a number of good dives around—one of those things we've got the north beat in. Dives up there are intentionally dated and filled with kitschy stuff bought online or at antique shops, or so I've heard. Ours are effortlessly beat-up by years, flooded and drained, expanded then contracted by a storm, and our kitschy stuff is donated by drunk patrons or found at dumpsters or garage sales by staff.

"Maybe she just needs someone to buy her drinks," I joked when he told me she was 20. The age difference between them didn't bother her, though, so he stopped letting the fact that she'd never seen *The Karate Kid* or grown up with Sega Genesis or Pearl Jam and Michael Jordan bother him. She's sweet, from what I know of her, and tastes like Key lime pie, from what I hear. She had been dating a guy named Mitch Cuevas for a year before that. I've seen him around town and at Our Place & Pizza occasionally. He runs a fishing charter out of Gulfport; one of the hunt-for-sport types, shooting ducks and deer, gators and nutrias for competition or practice or pleasure. It's not my thing, but I don't knock it; everybody's got a thing. She said she dumped him because one day he killed a beaver.



“Why’d he kill it?” Tom asked on the night they were talking about their pasts. They didn’t intend to air grievances about former relationships, I don’t think, but they just ended up talking about them after dinner when they were walking along a sidewalk near the beach.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Just because it was a beaver. He said they’re destructive and damage the environment. But he just got his gun out and shot it right in front of me.”

Tom told me that if this was her ex’s real reason to kill a beaver, he should be driving an electric sedan and protesting the city government and the university to put solar panels on their roofs. He said to me, “If he really feels that way, he should hijack the elevator at the casino, go up to the corporate floor, and go on a shooting spree.” I know he wasn’t encouraging shooting sprees; he was just making a point.

As the girl thought it over, her eyes rolled up towards the moon and Tom took it as a sign that the conversation about exes needed to come to an end. So he helped it close: “Well, I love animals,” he said and kissed her—Key lime pie.

Tom says there’s a certain ugliness down here, though, and that some days he almost feels it hanging in the air like summer heat. He means this place’s past. He’ll say, “History, capital H,” like he’s invoking material from the graduate seminars he’s taking. But he admits it’s everyone’s story, not just the South’s. As for me, I don’t have a connection to it really. My family mostly came to the state in a wave during the twentieth century—Texan on one side, German on the other; although I never found out whether we were Jews or Nazis or some in-between group not talked much about in books. Except for my Grandma Cora on my dad’s side, whose roots go back to before the Spanish ceded

the Coast, my family's been here only seventy years. So seventy years—I guess I have some connection to it, but it's far off and detaching when I look for it, like looking at a gray photo of dead ancestors framed in yellowed paper beneath a plastic page-cover. And that's only when I look for it.

Anyway, that residue hanging in the air rarely condenses into anything physical, about as much as it does in any other place. Sometimes it comes out in rhetoric and politics, in an insinuation about education or food stamps, or a less than veiled type of corruption—legislators' payday-loan businesses that overwhelmingly affect a certain group of people. I don't feel the past in the air much myself, but I can see how a northern transplant might—arriving at the place of action in all the American history textbooks, the place of the Confederacy, the Klan, the murder of the Freedom Summer workers, of lynching and cotton plantations, of feverish religion.

What I hear when I do hear things sounds more like traditionalist chitchat, the repeating of Sunday-talk, people saying Jesus this-and-that or just uninspired bias. The racial stuff is around in pockets but people make asses of themselves everywhere and no state is past it completely. One of my professors told me that Faulkner once said the past isn't even the past. Sounds about right. But at least it's mostly kept neatly tucked beneath a layer How-do-you-do's.

Tom says there are a lot of good people here and I'm glad he sees that. He also says there are a lot of cats. It's true; there are far too many cats, and not just at Magnolia Palms Apartments. Around the downtown district and at the university they're all over the place. And I'm not talking about somebody's cats. These are just feral cats, born to a cat somebody let go or the cat that cat produced. The undergrads feed them on campus

and some of the employees do, too. There's a group of brown and gray ones always hanging around the fire pit outside of Our Place & Pizza on weekends, looking for food or a good rubdown. It's not unique to the Coast, though. It seems that a lot of universities have them. I did my undergrad in northwest Florida and there were cats all over the place there, too. And it led to my sister getting a kitten. But the frustration Tom sometimes conveys about the town's inability to get a hold of the cat population really isn't close to the level he feels towards the guy with an Arkansas plate parked in the visitor lot.

For four weeks that he's seen at least, the truck has been there all day every day. True, he's not there watching at all moments—his leg's not in a cast and he doesn't own binoculars. But the truck hasn't moved. He knows it hasn't because he walks Jax three or four times a day. His dog is a privileged old mutt, but I imagine that only twice a day for big dogs would be underappreciating the anxiety of a full bladder.

There are three dogs in this truck. They're smaller than Jax but they're not small dogs. They're not Yorkies or Chihuahuas. One's a pit mix. "Of course, a pit mix," Tom said when he told me. I get why it's of course; mean-looking dogs have a certain appeal to some people. And I suppose some people like that do live in the South. The other two are a fuzzy brown type of terrier.

He mostly only saw the pit mix when he walked by because it jumped at the windows, which were almost always up and only sometimes cracked. The pit fogged them up with a bark that sounded like a muffled demand or accusation. Every day they sit out in the white Ford F-150 barking at passersby, squirrels, or one of Long Beach's procreant cats. Every afternoon their owner, this skinny guy always sporting sunglasses and a cigarette, comes by around 5:30 and lets them out, one at a time, long enough to

piss and crap, and then he puts them back in the truck. After the third dog, the guy either gets back in another pick-up with an in-state plate to drive away or, when the other truck's not there, he just walks away casually. "Real casually," Tom said. "Like he's got an attitude about how casual he is, flicking his cigarette with his whole arm involved in the act." Tom came past that other truck with the Mississippi plate when he was taking Jax out. It was sitting in front of another building at Magnolia Palms.

After a few more days of seeing the dogs still inside the truck, he went over to the leasing office. "You guys know somebody's keeping their dogs in a truck in the visitor lot, right?" He's a dead ringer for a Yankee now that I think about it. He says 'you guys' a lot, refusing to add ya'll to his vocabulary. It could only be worse if he used the full-blown northern 'yous guys'—'Hey, yo, yous guys know there dogs in that truck?'

Krystal was behind the desk, a squat brown-haired girl, maybe late-twenties or so. "In the visitor lot?" she repeated. "Yes, we're aware of it."

That wasn't good enough for Tom. It was a warm day for February, which on the Coast can run you into the mid-70s. "I've been noticing them when I take my dog out for like three weeks." I don't know why he gave the guy an extra week, but he only had it for a second:

"It's been almost five weeks," Krystal said. It seemed they knew exactly what was going on and Tom was relieved for a moment. "We had Animal Control come out twice. They went to the truck and checked in on the dogs, but they said there's nothing they can do about it."

“Legally?” That punctuation doesn’t quite cut it. It was more like an interrobang—that combination of the ? and the !, signaling disbelief. I wouldn’t have believed her either; why wouldn’t Animal Control have done something?

She nodded. “They talked with him. He’s staying here at his parents’ apartment.”

“But all the apartments are pet-friendly,” he pushed, trying to get some kind of assurance that she and the rest of the staff would handle this. “Do they know that? Why don’t they just bring the dogs in?”

The sense of optimism he thought he’d heard in her voice disappeared: “The parents don’t want the dogs inside. There’s really nothing we can do about it.”

His frustration lessened a bit as he walked back from the office trying to appreciate the possibilities surrounding the guy’s situation—having to move back home because he lost his job in Arkansas, maybe; or just visiting for a few weeks, helping out with prepping for Mardi Gras; or regretting every day whatever brought him back to his asshole parents who don’t let his dogs inside. The guy could’ve been just as upset about the dogs being in there all day as Tom was. But Tom’s frustration came back as he thought about the fact that, despite any of these possibilities, the guy’s gone all day and leaves them all night in the truck, not taking them out to play with them or letting them run around; only quick enough to find a tree and a spot of grass, then locking them back into the cabin of the pick-up.

After that Tom continued to keep an eye on the truck, walking by it every time he took Jax out. And then the girl he was seeing came over one night. They were dating for about two months at that point. Sitting on his little balcony and drinking some rum, they were talking about Tom’s plans for after May graduation when the guy pulled up in the

Mississippi truck. He had started calling the guy Mitch, but he didn't do it in front of her.

"A scrawny Mitch with sunglasses, smoking cigarettes like he's a cool guy; asshole."

Maybe it's because of the girl's ex, or maybe it's just because it sounds like a portmanteau for male bitch. I figure it probably had something to do with both. As they watched, the guy let the dogs out as he always did—one at a time. Piss. Crap. Back in the pick-up. Next dog, same thing. And the cigarette and sunglasses would follow.

"We should say something to him," the girl said after Tom filled her in. The guy was still with the third dog, standing over it on a grassy patch at the end of the lot, waiting for it to go.

"Yeah," Tom nodded, taking another sip from his glass. He thought about how he could take the guy if he had to, if he said something to him and the guy retaliated with a swing. But Tom thought he'd just end up with the cops called or the guy cussing him off and walking on back to his parents' place. Nothing productive. And if the cops did come, Tom figured luck would see them arrest him—the Yankee. Even if the guy had an Arkansas plate, he could still be a local. His parents did live here, after all.

"No, seriously," she said, staring now. He could hear the anger trickling up in her voice. "We should."

"What'll it do?" Tom asked with another sip. "He'll tell us to fuck off and walk away and that'll be it." Maybe not, he thought, but he didn't want to fight a Southerner anywhere near his pick-up.

The girl's ex, the real Mitch, kept a gun in his truck at all times. She told Tom he kept it behind the passenger seat when she was explaining how he could've just pulled over and shot the beaver. "But," she clarified, "a lot of people do that. It's not weird."

The thought made him uneasy whenever they were out on her front porch and saw the ex's black Dodge Ram circle her block. The windows were always up and he imagined the ex aiming a gun at him from behind the tinted glass.

Now he figured they all did—that if someone had an oversized pick-up, they had a gun, which they kept in the glove box or behind the passenger seat. And he wasn't going to fight a Southerner near his white Ford F-150 gun-safe. I suppose the details about her ex left a mark on Tom, or at least roused some of those ideas about Southerners and guns that he thought he had let go of.

Finally, he told her he would call the cops in the morning if they were still in there, but he already knew they would be. So around 10:00 the next morning, he finally did call the police.

“We’ve already been out there to talk with Mr. Tyler,” the operator said. “We’re aware of the situation and he said he’s taking care of it.” But the guy didn’t take care of it. Another few days went by before Tom began looking into state laws on the matter. He went on his computer and typed in *animal cruelty laws and Mississippi*, and let the Internet do the rest.

§ 97-41-1. *Cruelty to living creatures. Except as otherwise provided in Section 97-41-16 for cats and dogs—*. He stopped reading and went to find 97-41-16.

§ 97-41-16. *Maliciously injuring dogs or cats. (1)(a) The provisions of this section shall be known and may be cited as the “Mississippi Dog and Cat Pet Protection Law of 2011.” (b) The intent of the Legislature in enacting this law is—*. He skipped down.

*(2)(a) If a person shall intentionally or with criminal negligence wound, deprive of adequate shelter, food or water, or carry or confine in a cruel manner, any domesticated dog or cat, or cause any person to do the same, then he or she shall be guilty of the offense of simple cruelty to a dog or cat.*

Tom shook his head at the statute's ambiguity in its use of *a cruel manner* to characterize the type of confinement, and again at the use of the word *simple* to qualify the type of cruelty. I was more surprised by the fact that it only applied to domesticated dogs and cats, so feral ones are shit out of luck.

Tom's anxieties about living in a place that seemed to have a fundamentally different worldview from his own started coming back. "Fucking hicks," he mumbled later that night while we were standing by the fire pit at Our Place. Some old drunk in a Molly Hatchet t-shirt with a long manicured beard like a biker's tossed his bottle at one of the cats, hit it square in the face. It wasn't hard enough to kill it, so the cat ran off. I almost said something to the guy but we left instead; there wasn't anything but violating common decency to charge him with.

Taking Jax out soon became a way for Tom to check on the dogs in the parking lot, so Jax's daily walks hiked up to six. The pit mix was still barking and fogging up the windows. And then, not long after, Tom's girl sent him a text asking him to call the Humane Society. He didn't think they would be able to do anything, but he did it anyway.

"Are you Jonathan?" the woman at the Humane Society asked.

"No."



“Oh, okay. Because we had another man call in a few days ago from Magnolia Palms Apartments to report it, too. You can call Animal Control and ask for—” I don’t remember the man’s name, Lamar or something. But Tom called them, too, and spoke with Mr. Lamar or something.

“Well, you know, I know a lot of dog owners will take their dogs out two or three times a day because you love your dogs. I know some people love their dogs or cats. But that’s not required,” he said.

“Legally?” Tom asked. “So the Mississippi Dog and Cat Protection Law doesn’t apply to leaving your dogs in a truck on hot days?”

“Well, see, we’ve been out there and Mr. Tyler is taking care of the dogs. He’s keeping them with food and water and shelter, and that’s what’s required of him. They’re not loose chasing anybody or trespassing. Now how many times he takes them out is up to him, you know? That’s up to the individual owner. Some dogs have that owner that’ll take them out a lot, and some don’t. If it were hotter, if it were July, he couldn’t be leaving them in there. But it’s not, you know.”

Tom calmed down a bit. It seemed reasonable what the guy was saying. It made sense. Some dogs have bad owners. So he let the days go by. That girl stopped coming over. Stopped texting him, too. He had asked her to be his girlfriend, to be official, I guess. She said she wasn’t ready to date someone new yet. Then she just stopped contacting him. Shame is that I know he liked her a lot. He wrote her a letter after a week not hearing from her and left it on her doorstep, but he wondered if she ever got it. He told me he didn’t mind too much whether she did or didn’t, that he felt better about it all just knowing he did it. Still, he stayed away from Our Place and so me and the other guys

started going to different bars to keep him hanging out. I did go back to Our Place a few times, though, and found out that the girl got back together with her ex, Mitch Cuevas. I didn't tell Tom but he found out anyway. He said it feels easier knowing that she got back together with him than it would've had she gone out with someone else. But he says it with such a quiet voice that I don't really believe him.

The white Ford F-150 at Magnolia Palms finally left after Animal Control surprised everyone and wrote the guy a ticket when the temperature hit 78. Despite that, Tom finds himself thinking more and more that he doesn't belong here. I asked him what he's doing in May. He said, "Maybe going back north." And that's probably what he'll end up doing after graduation.

"That's too bad," I told him one night at a sports bar we started going to. "We like you down here. Lots of high schools need good history teachers." But he didn't say anything. "You know that girl got fired from Our Place?"

"Who? She did?" He smiled. "What'd she do?"

"A few nights ago—Wednesday, when it was raining real hard. She let some of the cats inside. Apparently the owner came by and saw them, like ten of them in the kitchen. He made her catch them all and put them back outside and then fired her on the spot."

Tom's smile lowered and he looked down into his glass of beer, twisting it around in his hands. He shook his head and exhaled. "That place."

## TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

It was something like quarter past three in the morning, the headlights bleeding out over the Missouri flatlands, as the car cruised at 90 toward the flush of light at the horizon—a town of some name between St. Louis and Kansas City. Faith had been driving for a solid three hours, and Liz was just waking from a short sleep after her second five-hour stint at the wheel of the rented Honda Civic.

The windows were all the way down and the summer's early-morning air ran through the car with a chill and a smell of farmland. Faith kept both hands on the wheel, her eyes focused on the flood of light over the road ahead. Liz yawned as she rolled away from the window and tightened the white-fringed Mexican blanket around her. Her wavy brown hair tapped against her shoulders and flickered at the window, sending the thinnest trace of flowery shampoo around the car to mix with the waft of cows pouring in from front to back.

It had been twelve weeks since Liz's husband died in Afghanistan when his unit rolled over an IED outside Kandahar. He was the only one of them to die. Since she got the phone call, she had stopped smiling with any sincerity, stopped laughing with any genuineness; she just moved through rituals and tasks without commitment. She couldn't let go of her sadness, carrying it around with her like an iron ball on her spirit.

"Where are we?" Liz asked.

"Good morning," Faith said with a glance. She had given up the efforts of artificial smiling for Liz. "Still a couple hours from Kansas City, I think."

"Okay. You all right?"

“I’m good.” Faith reached her hand down to the center console and picked up her drink. “I stopped and picked up some coffee. Got you an OJ,” she pointed.

Liz nodded and reached for the folded piece of paper in the pocket of her backpack.

“Are you reading it again?” Faith asked.

“What?” Liz pulled it out carefully. “The poem? Yeah. I love it. I can’t help myself.”

Faith nodded. “I know.” She glanced over again. “Are you memorizing it yet?”

“No,” Liz said looking down at the sheet. “I don’t know.”

Liz had taken up reading essays and poetry written by women who had lost their husbands or boyfriends or fiancés in the war. A woman from Fort Leavenworth had created a website where others shared their work, where they could provide encouragement and suggestions to one another. When Liz told Faith about it, a month after the funeral, Faith told her to try it out, to write some stuff down, that it could help. She knew Liz was feeling like an island living down at her parents’ new house in North Carolina—far from their hometown in southwest Vermont. But it wasn’t until Liz called at two in the morning on a Wednesday to read her a poem over the phone—a short one called “Deer” by a woman from Fort Polk who had lost her husband and her baby in the same month then moved to New Mexico—that Faith decided to fly back to Fayetteville and take Liz on a road trip.

Liz shared the poem with her sister and her parents, too; they gave her sympathetic smiles, told her it was sad and that she could write something better. Then she stopped sharing.

*When you see me*, she read, holding her phone over it. The handwritten copy she had made just before they hit the road trembled in her fingers as the air continued to whoosh through the car. She repeated the line in her head, testing herself to see if she had started to memorize it.

*When you see me, you know I'm there.*

She reached back and drew her blanket over her shoulders. Then continued:

*But I only see the woods.*

*When you touch me, you know I'm here.*

*But I only feel the piney woods.*

*When you think of me, you know I'll be all right.*

*Because I know the world well enough. I know how to find water.*

*How to walk a long way.*

*But all I know is I'm in the dark piney woods.*

*Because my herd is in the plain.*

*And I've forgotten how to get there.*

*Because my child is in the plain.*

*And I've forgotten how to get there. But I will wander on and look.*

*Because I know how. Because the woods.*

Liz stopped and looked out again toward the empty fields that hummed past with the buzz of crickets. The sky above was as clear as any sky she'd ever seen. Constellations stretched above them—Cassiopeia and the Little Dipper were the two she could remember. In the distance lightning flashed, but without thunder and without rain—flashing for no reason at all.

“Sorry, does the light bother you?” Liz asked, tilting the phone toward the window.

Faith shook her head, recalling the lines of the poem. “Not at all.”

“Just let me know when you need me to take over,” Liz said looking back to the splashes of light in the distance. “Sometimes I wish I could do what she did. Just pick a random place on the map and say, I’m going there.”

“What who did?” Faith asked.

“Sarah Thomas, the poet. The one who wrote ‘Deer.’ She just dropped everything and moved to a town called Truth or Consequences in New Mexico. She literally threw a dart at a map.”

“Truth or Consequences?” Faith nearly smiled then stopped herself.

“It’s a spa town, supposedly, which sounds nice.”

“Sounds odd. Who would name a town Truth or Consequences? It’s a little strange, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Liz said, still staring into the night. “I guess.”

When they approached the spot that had cast the glow, they saw that it was the center of a small town placed at the junction of two highways, maybe a couple thousand people in the whole place. Stoplights, streetlamps, and a billboard lit-up by skylights advertising a place called Ving’s Wings and an Iron Horse Inn—that’s all it took to transform the night into a false pink. Faith slowed down to a steady 80 as they came upon the junction.

“Cop,” Liz said, spotting him in the dark near the corner on the opposite side. But it was too late. They were going too fast for Faith to drop to 55.

“Shit,” she said with a look at the speedometer.

Liz straightened her back and looked toward the cop. “Okay. It’s alright,” she said as his car pulled out behind them. The red and blue lights flicked on. He didn’t turn on the siren, just the lights. Faith slowed down and pulled over to the side of the road about a hundred yards from where the highways crossed and waited for her ticket.

“Dammit,” Faith said. She looked in the rearview mirror but could only see the spinning lights.

“What’s he doing?” Liz asked, peering into the side mirror and eyeing the same revolving red and blue.

“I don’t know. Running the plates, probably,” Faith huffed. “Let’s not say anything about driving to Denver. He’ll think we’re buying pot or transporting it or something and search us and waste two hours instead of just giving us a ticket and letting us get going again.”

Liz folded her poem and tucked it into the pocket of jeans. “You know he’ll ask us where we’re going.”

“Maybe,” Faith said. “Maybe not.”

After another minute, two cops walked up to the Civic, one on each side. The one on Faith’s side was a heavier guy with thick-framed glasses, and the one on Liz’s was thin and hard-looking, like he was ex-military, neither looking much older than thirty.

“License and registration,” the heavy one said to Faith.

“You two were going pretty fast, don’t you think?” the one on Liz’s side asked, leaning down to the window.

She watched his nostrils move out then in. Liz nodded. "I don't know," she said as she bent her head back against the seat to avoid his nose.

He breathed hard and brought his head back outside the car. "Don't know, huh?"

The other cop studied Faith's license. "Miss Masterson, that right?"

"That's right."

"All right, Miss Masterson," the heavy cop continued. "You two are going to follow us back to the station around the corner up there." He pointed. "You understand that?" he asked, handing back her license.

"What? Are you being serious?"

Liz looked up at the officer on her side. "I don't understand. Are we under arrest?"

"Not yet." He glared back at her and she watched his eyes drift down to her shirt. She tightened the blanket around herself.

The heavy one went on, "And we don't expect to have to, so just follow us to the station. We've got our computers and the paperwork back there. Is that clear?"

Faith and Liz nodded and the two officers walked back to the car and got in as Faith and Liz sat silent, watching the revolving lights.

When she heard their doors close, Liz looked over at Faith. "The station?"

"I don't know. I have no fucking idea."

"You don't think they're going to try to—"

"No," Faith cut in. "No. They're cops."

The police car's lights turned off as it pulled around past the Civic, slowing as it reached Faith's window. The hard-looking officer waved his finger to follow.



“Freaking Middle Missouri Security Corporation,” Faith read as the car went by.

“What the hell is that? Security?”

“Yeah. Corporation?” Liz added.

Faith slapped the wheel. “Are they not even police?”

Liz leaned toward the windshield, trying to make out the lettering on the back of their car. *MMSC*. “Why didn’t they just give us a ticket?”

“I don’t know. But if they’re not cops, I’m not going to follow them,” Faith said as she put the car into drive.

“They had lights on the car.”

“And badges and guns too,” Faith said. “Doesn’t mean they’re cops, Liz.”

Faith put her hand up to her mouth, thinking about the officer’s eyes again. “The one on my side checked me out. Do you think they’re trying to get us—”

“No, Liz,” Faith interrupted again. “Maybe. It doesn’t matter because we’re not following them.”

The security car had stopped at the traffic light up ahead—now green again. Faith pulled up next to them.

“Faith, what’re you doing,” Liz said. “What’re you doing.”

The two officers stared through the open passenger window of their car. Their faces dropped into what looked like restrained rage.

“So are you guys from a mall around here?” she asked.

The cop nearest them, the hard-looking one, leaned his head out the window.

“This county licenses out police work to Middle Missouri.” His voice was severe but he spoke slowly and clearly. “We’re Middle Missouri. You take off right now and the

trouble you're in will triple in a second. So think real hard about it before you take your foot off the brake." He brought his head back inside and turned to talk to his partner.

"Oh my god." Liz was turned completely in her seat, with a leg folded under her, facing the other car. "Follow them, Faith. I've heard about these things. We have to follow them."

"Seriously?"

"They're not cops officially but they're acting cops. Or for-hire cops or something. I've heard of it before."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"No, I know." Liz pushed her leg back out and faced forward. "But it's real. I know it's a real thing."

"So," the officer shouted. "What'll it be?"

Faith rested her head on her hands atop the wheel. "Shit." She lifted it and called back, "I'm sorry. We're following."

The officers put up the window and made a fast left turn.

Faith and Liz followed for a few minutes but still hadn't arrived at the station. They were well off the highway when Liz realized she hadn't been paying attention to the roads. "Do you know how to get back to 70?" she asked.

Faith stared at the brake lights in front of her. "Yeah, I'm watching."

"Okay." Liz looked toward the empty fields out the window.

Faith laughed. "Wait, I thought you were the one convinced they're cops."

"No, I do." She moved her hand over her pocket and felt the outline of the paper.

"Just in case, you know?"

“In case what?” Faith said. “In case they try to gang rape us?”

“No,” Liz shouted, embarrassed now. “I don’t know.”

“In case it’s the Texas chainsaw massacre?”

“Something like that, Faith. I don’t know, okay?” Liz pulled the blanket back over her shoulders. “I just want to be careful with these people. I mean, authority goes to people’s heads. Sometimes even the real police act like they’re the only law.”

Faith pointed, tapping the edge of her index finger against the windshield. “Look, Liz.” A large sign that read *Township of Ridge Prairie Police and Fire Department* hung over the small brick building straight ahead of them. “We’re okay.”

As they pulled behind the cops into the horseshoe driveway, Faith said, “Just let me do the talking, all right?”

“What? Yeah, because that’s done us well so far.” Liz shook her head.

“Shut up, Liz. Look, these guys aren’t going to give us a hard time. And if they do, I’ll deal with it. We’ll be fine.” She left a gap between them and the officers’ car large enough to turn the wheels sharply, and put the Civic in park.

“Fine. Whatever,” Liz said as the two cops stepped out and slammed their doors.

Neither one of the officers said a word as Liz and Faith followed them inside. They went through two glass doors and into an open room with a square desk in the middle. An old man sat smoking a pipe and reading a newspaper as a small television sitting on his desk droned with the sound of audience laughter. He didn’t look like cop either—a neatly trimmed, gray beard, wearing a flat-brimmed Panama hat with a white hatband laced around it, the kind that made both Liz and Faith think of a summer garden party somewhere in Florida.

“These the speeders?” the old guy asked, keeping his eyes fixed on the paper.

“Yeah,” the thinner cop answered. “Thought about taking off on us.”

“That so,” he said, face still in the paper.

The walls of the police department were whitewashed and looked more like a hospital waiting room. Some of the chairs lining the room were just metal bars with cushions at the butt and back, and one had an open handcuff hanging off near its bent front-left leg.

“You two come on back here to the office,” the heavier officer ordered, holding the door open to the back room. His voice was calmer now.

“Have a seat,” he said, pointing to two empty chairs on the far side of a foldout table.

Liz sat down immediately. Faith walked around to the side of her. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a pack of cloves. “You mind if I have a smoke?” she asked with the black cigarette to her lips.

The heavier cop shook his head then looked down at a pad of paper in his hand. She lit it up.

“All right, girls,” he began, still looking down at the pad of paper in his hand.

“I’m Officer Jenkins and this is Officer Rahter,” he said with a wave toward his partner.

“Here’s the deal. You were going twenty-five over when we tagged you.”

“Ten,” Faith interrupted. “We were going ten over.”

“No,” the military-looking cop said as he sat down. “Now, we understand you’re not from around here, but that really don’t concern us much at all. Two girls speeding

through the center of our town is two girls speeding through the center of our town.

Know what I mean?"

"Yes, officer," Liz said. Faith gave her a look.

"We understand," she added. She exhaled the fruity smoke and it swelled up into the light hanging from the ceiling. "But, it's almost four in the morning, officer. We wouldn't be riding like that come eight or nine in the morning, you know? We were literally passing through."

"Well now, I hear you," Jenkins said, adjusting his glasses and checking out his pad again. "Miss Masterson, that right?"

Faith nodded. "Yes." She bent her leg and put her right foot up on the chair next to Liz, then leaned her elbow onto her knee.

"All right. Well, Miss Masterson," he began, looking at her as he sat down across from Liz. "This isn't Vermont," he said.

Rahter tapped his fingers against the table. "This here is Ridge Prairie. You got that? And we don't care for passersby driving through with wanton disregard for the public."

"That's right," Jenkins jumped back in, pushing his glasses to his forehead. "And since we caught you two going well over the limit, we're going to need to question each of you individually and conduct a thorough search of your persons and the motor vehicle."

Faith didn't hesitate: "We can't do that."

"Now look," Jenkins said. "You don't have many options here. Do you understand? You were breaking the law. So we're confiscating the vehicle until the

paperwork is filed.”

“No, I understand, officer,” Faith continued with another drag from her clove.

“But you can’t take the car because it’s not our car.” She exhaled a smooth line of smoke.

Liz laid her hands on the table. “What do you mean until the paperwork is filed? How long will it take to file it?”

Jenkins turned his head slightly at Faith. “It’s not your car? Is it a rental?”

“Sorry, I thought you ran the plates,” she said. “Yes, we rented it in Fayetteville, North Carolina.”

“What happened to Vermont?” Rahter prodded.

Faith nodded at Liz. “She lives in North Carolina. I live in Vermont.”

“Sounds like a drug thing,” Rahter said.

“No, it’s not a drug thing,” Faith said with a tired pace.

Jenkins pushed his glasses up again and put down his pad of paper. It was still completely white. “Look, we’re going to have to have you two stay the night until tomorrow morning when we get all this cleared up. We’ll release you once it’s all sorted through and taken care of.”

“Absolutely not,” Faith countered. She blew out some more of the smoke, which was beginning to turn the room pale. “We can’t do it. We don’t have time to do that.”

“Empty your pockets,” Rahter ordered.

Liz stood immediately and pulled out the folded piece of paper, put it on the table, and turned her pockets inside out. Faith tossed her pack of cloves over.

Rahter reached and grabbed the folded paper. He unfolded it.

Jenkins moved one of his chubby hands over his stomach. “What do you mean you don’t have time?”

“What I mean is that we can’t do it.” Faith sat down in the chair and leaned over the table. Looking at Liz she said, “I’ve got to get her to Kansas City by seven-thirty so she can make her flight.”

“Flight?” he asked, picking up his pad of paper.

“Yeah,” Faith answered. Liz stayed quiet.

“Flight where?” He scribbled something across the small sheet.

“Truth or Consequences.”

Rahter laughed. “Jim, you’ve got to read this. It’s the stupidest thing,” he said offering Jenkins the piece of paper.

“Hang on, Robert. Truth or Consequences, you said? Where is that?”

“New Mexico,” Liz said. “It’s in southwest New Mexico.”

Faith nodded her head as she pulled the clove back away from her lips. “New Mexico. She’s has to get to Kansas City so she can make her event tomorrow in Truth or Consequences. We were going to drive it all, but we left too late. One of her other gigs just ran too long. So I’m dropping her off and then picking her back up in Las Cruces.”

“Truth or Consequences,” Jenkins repeated. “I never heard of that place. What event is it?”

“It’s there.” Faith exhaled another draft of smoke up into the light. “You can get a map, if you’ve got one.” She continued to smoke as Jenkins opened the door. “She’s a poet. She has an event tomorrow evening and she has to be there. I really have no say in the matter.”

“A poet?” Rahter repeated. He brought the piece of paper back down and looked over it again.

Jenkins took a step over and looked at it. “What is it?”

“A poem.”

“Huh,” he walked to the door. “Bill,” he called out toward the old guy at the desk.

“Bill, you ever hear of a city called Truth or Consequences in New Mexico?”

“Nope,” Liz and Faith heard him call back. “I’ll look it up.”

“I’ll be right back,” Jenkins said, shutting the door behind him.

Faith took another drag. “So you’re like what, twenty-one?” she said to Rahter. “I shouldn’t say this, but you’re cute.”

Rahter’s face turned serious. “Now miss, you’re not flirting with an officer on the job, are you?”

“Oh,” she answered. “No, I’m sorry.” Then she took another drag. “Don’t you think he’s cute, Liz?”

Liz glared over at her then looked at the officer.

“Well,” Faith said.

Rahter looked back at Liz with eyebrows up. She smiled at him. “Yes. I do. He is cute.”

The officer shook his head as the door swung back open and Jenkins walked back in. “All right,” Jenkins said, tossing his pad of paper onto the table. He put his hand on Rahter’s shoulder. “Bill corroborated it. The place. Truth or Consequences.” He looked down at the pad of paper then pocketed his hands. “So this is what we’re going to do, girls. We’re going to enter you into our system with a warning on behalf of the Middle



Missouri Security Corp that will be attached to your license, Miss Masterson. Now that's permanently fixed, so if you get caught speeding around here again, you'll be staring at a double fine. Do you understand?"

"Yes, officer," Faith said.

"Thank you so much," Liz said.

Rahter pushed the poem back over to Liz. "Well, I don't believe these girls will be driving like that anymore. Will you?"

"No, we won't," Faith said quickly. "I can promise you that. I don't even like driving that fast. I honestly thought we were farther away than we are. It's just unsafe."

He nodded. "Yes it is. So you two be careful on the rest of your trip." He looked over at Liz. "And good luck with your event, ma'am."

"Thank you, officer. Both of you," she said. The officers followed them out to the car.

"I'm very sorry about the inconvenience," Faith called out as she and Liz got back into the Civic. "Goodnight!" They shut the doors, Faith turned the key, and they pulled out of the horseshoe driveway, back toward 70.

"Faith?"

"Not even a ticket," Faith tapped at the steering wheel with her fingers. "I can't freaking believe it. Not even a freaking ticket."

"Faith."

"Yeah. What's up? You okay?"

“What the hell just happened?” Liz asked. She couldn’t tell whether she was angry or sad. “I was scared half to death and you were screwing around in there, talking about New Mexico. Why’d you do that?”

Faith laughed. “Relax, Liz. I don’t know. It worked. Look.” Her smile grew. “Do you want the truth?”

“Of course. Yes. What the hell else would I want?” Liz looked closely at Faith’s smile in the passing streetlights—a full smirk. “What. The consequences?” Liz blushed, trying to hold back her laugh. She couldn’t. It shot through her teeth like a deer through the edge of woods.

## BLACKLETTER

Before the jury is let in, the Justice only sees the lawyer holding his briefcase in one hand and a collection of paper-clipped documents in the other. He's wearing a suit that signaled the seriousness of his cause. The Justice, on her bench, has on her black robe and folds her hands.

Before any new case starts up the Justice gets cozy in her chambers, methodically rearranging her book collection and listening to her favorite music. Inevitably it becomes boring to her. But the music slowly makes her excited to greet the court. And then when the time arrives, as always happens, it all seems burdensome to her.

The lawyer approaches the Justice. "Better to rein in clients than swerve in the chair."

What an ass. "Is that all you've got?"

He smirked. "Not even close."

She knows him pretty well. Well enough. So she smiles faintly—because it's him again. She looks across toward the afternoon sun shining in from the windows, a pretty blue, and remarks about the light then: "Let the jury in." She looks out toward the people in the courtroom and happily grins at the apparent public interest.

The lawyer turns from the Justice toward the people. "Proof for the court" the lawyer says still holding the thick stack of papers in his hand.

In the face of the people, the Justice is attentive but aims to showcase her objectivity. She listens, knowing the law, and carries it through in her mind. She knows the proper outcome immediately but proceeds with her analysis, a needless kind of self-

examination; and finally she agrees with herself that she doesn't really agree with this lawyer.

The people lean forward to see the evidence from their awkward position before the bench but behind the Bar. Its sheets are filled with a small typeface that runs across the pages with small margins and has a heading that indicates its legitimacy. They speculate about what it says. After a moment to themselves, they start to argue. They're all thinking about ramifications—the case connecting to some future case, or cases beyond those in all different directions.

“Proof” the lawyer says again, pointing to the bolded section-headers throughout the document: Exceptions, Conditions, Posterity—it's all covered.

The people talk—they're not always arguing; sometimes they do talk, and not always about pertinent things. But now and again they look over at the jury box. Individually, one by one, each of the people wonder, “Who are these jurors?”

The Justice's mind wanders back to the order she's been putting her books in, and then a bit about the evidence. Finally she decides it's time to use her gavel and orders the jury's verdict. The lawyer, in his confidence, sits to hear the outcome while the people stand to see.

The jurors rise in unison and proclaim, honestly at least, that they cannot agree to a verdict, that they don't really understand what answers they've been tasked with divining. They need clarification of the blackletter law.

The Justice smiles and, with great patience, calls for a recess.

“Care to have lunch?” the lawyer asks her.

What an ass. “That'll be nice,” she says.

NONFICTION

## A WALL OF PRECEDENT

I'm not a particularly religious person. I grew up Roman Catholic but I stopped going when I was 18. It was a little over a year after 9/11. A little over a year before my seventeenth birthday when the Towers were brought down and a fifth of the Pentagon was blown apart—the day before I took my driving exam. I remember when I failed the parallel parking portion, my examiner shrugged his shoulders and said, “It doesn't matter, kid. Nothing matters anymore.” He pointed to the cone leaning out from my front-left tire and told me to do it again. So I passed.

Having grown up less than twenty miles west of the places now designated the North and South Pools, having watched the smoke eat away at the sky near my house in suburban New Jersey over the following weeks, September 11 has a greater weight for me than my birthday on the twelfth. Before the day in 2001, cloudless blue skies were beautiful and that's it; now they're beautiful and terrifying, as if there's a dark force about to burst through them, as if there's a plot to blow them up. Cloudless blue is September-11th blue, and it's on those days that I feel like death is nearest. Before 9/11 I mostly trusted God that I'd see twenty-something, that I'd find true love, that I'd buy a house, have grandchildren, that I'd get to experience everything my parents promised that life had promised. But expectations like those are a lot like religion to me now: sometimes pretty, more often garish or quaint; sometimes important, more often hollow.

I don't keep much of any religion now. And I'm content with that. The Golden Rule sounds nice. But depending on the week so does Walt Whitman or Black Elk or Nietzsche.

I recently saw someone post something on Facebook that said *Do Unto Others As They Do Unto You ... I Wish Others Knew*. This was a severely religious guy I met a few times during my first year of law school in Florida. And his religion—listed for all to see as “Follower of Christ”—was something I remember he took seriously. The guy must have misread it, I thought. You don’t do unto others as they do unto you; you do unto others as you *would have them* do unto you. Maybe he didn’t misread it, though. Maybe the editor of his bible was a poor grad student somewhere doing summer work for a few extra bucks. In that case, the scariest part would be that he’s working in politics now and he has a mission: Make the United States more closely resemble what God wants—and that edition of God he subscribes to may be poorly edited.

None of us come from the same exact place, though we likely share some values. I’m saying *us* and *we* but I mean “We the People.” It’s not sentimental. Many things develop us as individuals, not least of which are our familial settings, moral upbringings, educations, and of course our religious instruction. Collectively, then, we’re a pluralistic bunch, as colorful as a Crayola box—or as polluted as the Cuyhoga River, depending on who you’re talking to. As diverse as our individual ancestries and experiences may be, so too are our beliefs. You and those who share in your particular ancestry or cultural traditions may have one specific idea or belief on the origin of the universe, on God, or on the use of hallucinogens in ritual. But the person sitting next to you on the train this morning or in the library now—and your neighbors—may have ancestries and cultural traditions stemming from a very different place. Her ideas on the origin of the universe, on God, and on hallucinogenic rituals may be completely different from yours. And still, this isn’t the end of it. Her neighbor may have a notion about the universe completely

different from hers and yours; he may accept societal behavior that outrages both of you, and he may be orthodox or he may be atheist.

Questions arise: In our pluralistic nation, how do we establish a rule of law without discriminating against religious or cultural practices? If we decide free exercise is a fundamental right, should we never pass laws that disallow actions even though some of us may perceive them to be religious duties? Is maintaining the legitimacy and authority of our legal system more valuable than religious freedom? How do we define freedom? How do we define religion?

Our Declaration says that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Thank God we now mean women by that, too. But as Jefferson later wrote, the document was “intended to be an expression of the American mind” while justifying the revolution against King George III. So yeah, this capital-C Creator in the Declaration is a reference to the Christian God. But before we suppose any implications of that, it’s important to note that the Declaration doesn’t have the force of law, and none of our courts have ever relied on it as authority in a decision. So while there’s a religious overtone to our act of independence, it’s not relevant here. I’m talking about law—the Law. The Constitution.

In the 1780s, at a time when people were taxed for the benefit and support of religious sects, when folks were punished for failing to attend public worship or for entertaining blasphemous thoughts, James Madison was circulating an argument in Virginia that religion is beyond the reach of government. Soon after, a bill drafted by Jefferson was passed in the Virginia House of Delegates declaring what belongs to the



Church and what to the State. And in 1789 the First U.S. Congress secured religious freedom in its modern sense by ratifying the First Amendment.

“Congress,” it reads, “shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” It’s a short phrase constructed by two seemingly straightforward clauses—the Free Exercise Clause and the Establishment Clause. Yet, with the growth of the United States both in population and in diversity, it’s become an immensely difficult prohibition. It doesn’t help that it’s paradoxical, too: If we can’t prohibit a religious exercise because it’s religious, do we in fact respect an establishment of religion?

In 1878 the Supreme Court was presented with the question of whether a Mormon should have been acquitted for violating the law against polygamy because he believed it to be his religious duty. The Court looked to a letter written by Jefferson stating that “the legislative powers of the government reach actions only,” that the language of the First Amendment “build[s] a wall of separation between church and State,” and that man “has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.” Because Jefferson was (and still is) seen as one of the leading advocates of the Amendment, the Court accepted his words as authoritative and concluded that doling out exceptions to those who are religiously motivated while punishing those who aren’t would make “professed religious belief superior to the law of the land” and “permit every citizen to become a law unto himself.”

That decision speaks to the problematic nature of a pluralistic society, where a sincere religious belief may directly contradict the law. But in the United States, where the free exercise of religion is etched into our Constitution, is such a prohibition on the free exercise of religion permissible? To prevent the government from existing in name

only, as the Court feared, the Nine declared it was. Preventing citizens from claiming religious exception to the law seems necessary to maintaining the law's authority. But we excused some from service in Vietnam because of their religion, so there's a problem here.

What constitutes a religion? The term isn't defined in the Constitution. And in a nation where apostasy is a fairly easy choice, are the presuppositions we have of religion too narrow? With the Establishment Clause aiming to protect against sponsorship, financial support, and active involvement by government in religion, we have a serious problem on our hands if we can't define religion. Maybe we're just over-thinking it. Maybe the establishment of religion is like Justice Potter Stewart's threshold test for pornographic obscenity: We know it when we see it.

I went to a Catholic elementary school where the nuns taught me that masturbation was evil and that I would fail assignments if I couldn't keep my shirt tucked in. (Ultimately, I failed fourth-grade Religion because of that. Then that nun ran off with the guidance counselor, a married woman, later that summer.) They taught me science and they taught me intelligent design—and being a rather progressive New Jersey Catholic school, it was a good balance of both. But it was a private school.

Back in 1982 the Arkansas legislature passed a bill ordering public schools to give the same balanced treatment. It's only fair, right? A little bit of this and a little bit of that; you decide which is right. But the two-model approach—teaching the literal interpretation of Genesis and contrasting it with a godless system of evolution—was held to be “an excessive and prohibited entanglement with religion” since Genesis' elements

are unique to the Judeo-Christian origin story. Religion-neutral teachings, though, would ostensibly be fair game.

It's all a balancing act, really: Where exactly do the nation's interests rest—in religious freedom or in government's curbing of that freedom? It's not always absolute. And religion isn't always an exception from the law. This leaves the status of religion in contemporary society positioned like a tightrope walker, carefully pacing herself down the thin line between religious freedom and societal needs. What that means for religion in the United States depends on what question a particular case presents. Same-sex marriage is the next big one, set for this summer. After that, who knows? If NASA's Mars Curiosity Rover is successful, religiously motivated educational issues may arise with science teachers discussing microbial alien life.

There's a wealth of concerns about religion in this country. Many of them are justified. When Kennedy was running for president a good number of the people were worried that he would be kissing the Pope's ring by February. To assuage those fears he addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association and said, "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute." It isn't the way things are in this multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian Crayola Cuyhoga of ours, but it's something to strive for. Quoting Robert Frost, Justice Felix Frankfurter once wrote, "We staked the very existence of our country on the faith that complete separation between the state and religion is best for the state and best for religion ... If nowhere else, in the relation between Church and State, 'good fences make good neighbors'." Those guys and gals quote literature a lot, thank God; between that and their names (see: Justice Learned Hand) it brings some humanity to their roles.

Thinking about that guy on Facebook again, I find myself thinking it's okay if a politician believes that he should do unto others as they do unto him, or that the end times are fast approaching, or that the white/black/red/yellow/brown man is to blame for all the problems of society. I hope we have enough sense to not elect him, but I don't mind if he believes it. The mission to makeover the whole place, though, is downright destructive, anarchic. Above the editions of Bibles, Qurans, and Torahs, there's another religion in this country that we see whenever we visit a state capitol or Washington. It's memorialized by hallowed statues and buildings built like Greek temples. We celebrate it with its own summer holiday. The United States itself is a religion, with its Constitution and laws filling the canon. I don't credit my walking away from religion to 9/11 or terrorism, or to sex trafficking or the Cuyhoga River, or to climate change. If I had to credit it to something, though, it might be to the idea of citizenship and the United States—to amendments and to revision. The wall I've built, like the wall the court has built, isn't one of separation for separation's sake. It's one of separation because experience demanded it. Because precedent grew taller, and brick-by-brick it made it so.